Transnational Feminism in 21st Century Black American Drama and Performance

By

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Abstract

"Transnational Feminism in 21st Century Black American Drama and Performance" explores twenty-first century works from playwrights who I group together loosely under the current transnational moment of playwriting. I include works from Tarell Alvin McCraney, Danai Gurira, Nikkole Salter, Lynn Nottage, Robert O'Hara, and Katori Hall. My primary aims are to extend due scholarly attention to these playwrights, several of whom have not yet received appropriate focus, and in so doing, begin the work of periodizing these twenty-first century playwrights, whose work I argue is united by a heading I will redefine and expand in these pages: African diasporic performance. With a multidisciplinary approach unified through transnational feminisms, I find that these works reveal the global through its impact on the local and—when set outside the United States—reveal the global through careful storytelling that avoids monoliths and calls out global forces and audiences' implicit and explicit role in oppressions. My study centers materialist readings through a transnational feminist lens and takes interest in extending the ongoing feminist effort to reclaim realism as a politically-impactful theatrical form. Ultimately, I argue that these playwrights' work should be more widely produced and celebrated for its ability to make visible global networks that demonstrate sometimes surprising, but often obscured opportunities for strategic coalition.

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Introduction

> The main productive vision for the future of Black Studies, I think, will consider the larger context, the impact of transnational capitalism on our communities, of overincarceration, overcriminalization, undereducation, and a whole host of social problems that have arisen as a result of the de-industrialization of the economy and the migration of corporations precisely to those countries from which people end up following the same circuits of immigration in order to come to this country to look for a better life. (Angela Davis, qtd. in Boyce Davies x-xi)

Much of the critical conversation surrounding the work of contemporary United States playwrights of the African diaspora tends to reinforce national boundaries. Such scholarly focuses interrogate a distinct American identity and often explore the complexities of what it means to be and to represent people of color in the United States. Indeed, much of this late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century work demands this investigation. Begun in the early 1980s, Anna Deavere Smith's long, multi-work project, *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, narrows in on specific events in the United States' recent history—the Crown Heights crisis of 1991 and the mass reaction to the Rodney King verdict in 1992, for example—and gathers the exact testimony of a wide range of citizens describing their relationship to the events. Suzan-Lori Parks's interest in United States' history (in the figure and mythos of Abraham Lincoln) and the most traditionally canonical American texts (Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*) exhibits a similar fascination with the national. However, increasingly, concerns of globalization and the growth of African diasporic studies demand scholarship that places national issues in a global context. Globalization—the corporatization that enables western, wealthy countries to engage in exploitative labor practices in less-developed countries, intertwining world workers'

realities—and the information technology that makes these practices possible generate a global impact too pronounced to speak of national identity as self-contained. The work of United States authors of the African diaspora reveals a good deal about this country's real and imagined position in the world. Furthermore, when considered in the light of transnational feminisms, these plays offer one avenue towards understanding how to best negotiate social justice advocacy in a global context.

This study explores twenty-first century works from playwrights who I group together loosely because their work falls within this transnational moment of playwrighting. The works come from Tarell Alvin McCraney, Danai Gurira, Nikkole Salter, Lynn Nottage, Robert O'Hara, and Katori Hall. My primary aims are to extend due scholarly attention to these playwrights, several of whom have not yet received appropriate focus, and in so doing, begin the work of periodizing these twenty-first century playwrights, whose work I argue is united by a heading I will redefine and expand in these pages: African diasporic performance. With a multidisciplinary approach unified through transnational feminisms, I find that these works reveal the global through its impact on the local and—when set outside the United States—reveal the global through careful storytelling that avoids monolithic conceptions of African peoples and calls out global forces and audiences' implicit and explicit role in oppressions. My study centers materialist readings through a transnational feminist lens and takes interest in extending the ongoing feminist effort to reclaim realism as a politically-impactful theatrical form. Ultimately, I argue that these playwrights' work should be more widely produced and celebrated for its ability to make visible global networks that demonstrate sometimes surprising, but often obscured opportunities for strategic coalition—raising a call to counteract the harmful realities outlined by Angela Davis in the epigraph above.

The black playwrights of my study all hold United States' citizenship and live and work primarily in the United States. For that reason, a brief note on my use of "black" rather than "African American" is necessary. Largely, this terminology is a means of respecting the ways that the playwrights themselves discuss and define their race and its relation to nation. While "African American" certainly can be understood as an intentional reference to African diasporic peoples across the Americas, it is often used in ways that limit its scope purely to black citizens of the United States. The broader term—black—avoids these associations and, in so doing, more accurately reflects the ways the playwrights discuss their own identities. For Danai Gurira, who was born to Zimbabwean parents and spent many formative years in Zimbabwe, she chooses "Zamerican" to more accurately trace her understanding of national identity—a direct African diasporic tie that thoroughly shapes who she is (Gurira and Salter, "*Theater Talk*"). Like an embrace of an African diasporic identity, the use of "black" suggests a transnational affinity of blackness which then challenges the nationalist framework of citizenship connoted by "African American." Both Gurira and Lynn Nottage have specifically identified threads in their work that argue for a growth in "global citizenship"—a notion directly supported through preserving and identifying as members of the African diaspora (Ehrbar, Shannon). In what may initially appear to contrast that view, Tarell Alvin McCraney has pushed back on the "African" in "African American"—a point on which I expand in the first chapter. In response to an interviewer pushing him to define himself clearly, McCraney answered, "[Y]ou're trying to make me say that I'm AFRICAN American, and I think I'm just American. I'm American and I'm black. That's pretty much all I can give you" (qtd. in Brodersen 17). As I argue in greater detail later, this distinction reads less as a rejection of membership in the African diaspora, and more as a rejection of the ongoing notion that "American" by default means "white." While his reasoning may differ from

that of Gurira and Nottage, his emphasis on "black" as a racial definer—when paired with the ways the other playwrights discuss race and nation—encourages me to follow this lead throughout.

Many of these playwrights' works have been produced internationally, but the productions that I have seen and reference in this study were produced in the United States. I focus on works by United States authors for several reasons. First, unlike other recent American plays, such works are not exclusively products of the United States, nor are they exclusively produced in the United States. By examining the influences and research that inform these pieces, my work will demonstrate the interdependence already undermining the notion of a national literature. Second and more importantly, these authors' United States citizenship positions them as having a stake in the neoimperial actions and policies of the United States, and they, by turn, implicate their American characters and audiences. By criticizing their country's actions and challenging policies with global impacts running counter to social justice, such authors begin the work necessary to recognize a global common ground. M. Jacqui Alexander provides an example of this recognition—this heightened visibility—in her focus on women workers: "When action research enables the women who work at Santa Anita Packers in Mexico, at one end of the food chain, to trace the destination of their labor to the women who work at food stores in Canada, the other end of the chain, they become visible to one another and interrupt the corporate invisibility that has been placed on them" (105). Many of the dramatists of this study trace similar global connections, shared fates. This visibility provides one means to map global injustice and to move against the inequality enabled and obscured by globalization.

Literature Review

The works of my study are all twenty-first century creations—some only a year or two old—which means the critical conversation surrounding them is in many ways still in the making. What is more, aside from Tarell Alvin McCraney and Lynn Nottage, the majority of these playwrights have not yet garnered the attention their work deserves. While gaps persist, prominent scholars have begun the work to periodize and categorize the work of some of these playwrights. One such effort is led by Harry Elam, Jr. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr. in their 2012 volume, *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays.* Elam and Jones characterize the post-black as the period after 2000, partly due to Thelma Golden of the Studio Museum and her declaration in the early 2000s that "Post-black was the new black" (qtd. in Elam and Jones, x). More exactly, they characterize its population as African American playwrights as being "unmoored from the ideological and strategic assumptions of the past" (xi). They cite Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. to further clarify this unmooring: "those who struggled in the 1960s did not have the symbolic weight of 'the 1960s' to contend with. We do. […] But our task is different because the conditions have changed" (qtd. in Elam and Jones, xi). The authors question the relevance of the overtly political and didactic for this generation of playwrights. Rather, they argue, "these artists strive for the unfamiliar, the unsettling, and the uncanny as means to offer progressive renderings of black identities structured by the unfamiliar, unsettling, and uncanny nature of our contemporary moment" (xii). Importantly, the authors distinguish post-black writers from the writers of the Black Arts Movement in the variety of the former's vision(s). While the Black Arts Movement, they argue, sought a common artistic perspective, post-black playwrights "do not attempt to cultivate a singular artistic perspective, nor do they envision themselves and their art as most principally part of a collective" (xix). The authors specifically include such playwrights

of my study as Danai Gurira, Nikkole Salter, and Robert O'Hara among their number of post-black playwrights.

This classification of post-black has gathered some critical momentum, gaining support within literary analysis as well as broader explorations of social sciences and American studies.[1] The classification initially appealed to me because of its use in identifying contemporary black dramatists' interest in intersectionality and globalization—even when such points of focus raised critiques that their works decentered blackness. While the term has its uses, its unintended meanings ultimately lead me away from its use in this study. In her 2015 article in *Black Renaissance*, Brenda Marie Osbey finds that, contrary to insistence from many supporters of the term, "post-black" functions as a rejection of blackness. She sees it as a damaging and inaccurate title: "It betrays that old, inherited belief in a state of grace that can presumably be achieved, attained, ascended into—the white 'inside.' . . . an incredibly narrow definition of Blackness as source and site of lack, absence, suffering, poverty of being" (113). Osbey's criticism speaks to a broader suspicion that the term elides too easily into the notion of a post-racial America raised with naiveté in some quarters and malice in others during the Obama era. Certainly, Elam and Jones's use of "post-black" rejects this elision in no uncertain terms, but the provocative nature of the term ultimately obscures more than it reveals. My interest in material realities and lived experiences is shared by the playwrights of my study, and as such, their work is more aptly captured through the idea of transnational and intersectional feminism than by "post-black"—both although and because blackness remains a central point of focus in their work.

[1] See, for instance, Cameron Leader-Picone's "Post-Black Stories: Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Racial Individualism" (2015), Nikol Alexander-Floyd's "Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era" (2012), and Itibari Zulu's "Africana Studies: Post Black Studies Vagrancy in Academe" (2012). See also a predecessor to Elam and Jones's text: Rinaldo Walcott's "Beyond the 'Nation Thing': Black Studies, Cultural Studies, and Diaspora Discourse (Or the Post-Black Studies Moment)" (2003).

While post-black attempts to periodize and offer a classification based in playwrights' racial identity, a notable thematic classification applicable to many dramatists of my study comes from Andrew Sofer's insightful 2013 book, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance.* In his final chapter, he coins the term, "The New Trauma Playwrights," which he provides to encompass their works' "emerging model of trauma as 'a past that has never been present' [which] has licensed playwrights to interrogate such received conventions as visible wounding, psychological unity of character, linear plot, reliable memory, and climactic catharsis" (119). In lieu of conventional staging, these works present "*traumatic history as a psychic absence*" (119). Sofer groups a number of playwrights under this heading, including Caryl Churchill, Martin Crip, and Adrienne Kennedy. It is his discussion of Suzan-Lori Parks, however, which speaks most centrally to the term's applicability for the playwrights of my study. Sofer argues that Parks's *The America Play* (1994) stages unseen terror because the work "considers African-American history as a trauma that can never come into full visibility because American culture has disavowed it" (123). This staging of the unseen as a means to critique the nation's unprocessed traumas and oppressions becomes a hallmark of many of the works of this study, which are doubtless indebted to Parks's innovations. Sofer does not specifically analyze any of the works that appear in my study, but I apply his classification of the New Trauma Playwrights in my third chapter and hope to see it furthered as the scholarly conversation surrounding these artists continues to mature.

One of the most prolific voices advocating African diasporic consciousness in studying American theater today is Paul Carter Harrison. In his 2005 article, "A Forum on Black Theatre: Performing Africa in America," Harrison separates black stage writing into two categories: Black Thea(tre) and thea(ter) that replicates black experience through social realism. Harrison

criticizes the latter category and seeks to shake it loose from the former because it invites audiences and scholars to accept "simplistic Eurocentric stereotypes of black life . . . [and] simple-minded self-parodies that burlesque black life" (588). For Harrison, Black Thea(tre) follows neither Aristotelian poetics nor the "vagaries of postmodernism" (589). Instead, he aligns Black Thea(tre) firmly within a diasporic aesthetic—one centered on a spirituality specific to the African continuum; he calls for further "investigations of African rituals, Caribbean Carnival, or even Black Church for stylizations consonant with African continuity in the diaspora" (589). Elsewhere, Harrison has termed his endorsed Black Thea(tre) "African Diasporic Performance," which he explains: "At the core of African diasporic performance is spirituality [. . .] African-Americans, like all Africans in the Diaspora, are a spiritual people who require rituals that reveal themselves beyond the limits of material reality of domestic life" ("Black Theatre" 137). Harrison—a phenomenologist—remains vague about the formal qualities required to create Black Thea(tre) or African diasporic performance, but has highlighted "the rhythmic spectacle of language, movement, and sound rooted deeply in the social negotiations of church, Carnival, and the call-and-response practices of collective experience" ("Praise/Word" 5). Additionally, his own readings of August Wilson's oeuvre in a 2014 article suggest that this African diasporic performance requires scholarly and audience literacy to be properly recognized; one must be trained to avoid western pitfalls of interpretation. In addressing Wilson's interpreters, he criticizes those scholars who read Wilson's work as "an aesthetic response to the American tradition that produced Arthur Miller, totally ignoring the mythic layers and symbolic underpinning that suggest a strongly Yoruba vision" ("Toward a Critical Vocabulary"). As such, the African diasporic performance Harrison advocates may be largely a project of recovery

work—of reinterpreting United States authored work without the restricting lens of exclusively western associations.

Harrison's classification and implied analysis of form have proven central to the scholarly conversation I enter with this study. Harrison's notion of Black Thea(tre) and African diasporic performance seem to me to most successfully capture the spirit of the work I take on within this study. Unfortunately, however, Harrison himself may not agree with the ways in which I extend his term within these pages. While Harrison explicitly praises the work of Tarell Alvin McCraney, placing McCraney in his preferred category, the majority of the black women playwrights in my study have found less easy places in his determined boundaries. As in his "thea(ter)" distinction above, Harrison needs a point of contrast to African diasporic performance, which he calls "American dramas of the black experience" (136). He claims that such writers (and he specifically mentions Lynn Nottage here) are post-racial; he interprets this term to mean that such writers refuse to center blackness or produce their work in black-run institutions, and that they ignore the performance traditions that emerge from African diasporic influences: "Rather than pursuing or at least inspecting the layers of symbolic references retained in the metalanguage of the African Diaspora [. . .] most expressive output of new black work developed at white institutions is usually subordinated by the popular receptivity of the content and systems of critical logic codified by the aesthetics of the dominant culture" (131). It is clear that Harrison largely rejects realism, journalistic theatre, the family drama, and many other theatrical forms prominent in the white and male dominated realms of Broadway and many other commercial theatre spaces. While the ongoing influence of predominantly white theatre spaces remains a legitimate concern that this study cannot resolve, I do position the study within the longstanding feminist effort to reclaim realism as a politically-impactful theatrical form—a form

employed and cleverly modified by several of these playwrights. My use of transnational feminist theories advances this feminist effort beyond its white, western origins. In sum, this project seeks, among other aims, to combat the reductive parameters Harrison places on African diasporic performance—placing the important work of the remaining playwrights of my study within this category as well, and thereby beginning to establish a categorization and periodization of this work under the shared aims of my definition of African diasporic performance.

What is more, while Harrison's call for reinterpretation resonates with my own aims, his phenomenological approach and concomitant focus on such broad ideas as "spirituality" present significant challenges for scholars interested in issues of social justice and the material realities of global capital. Harrison falls prey to an arguably dangerous appreciation of myth in his sentence-long dismissal of Katori Hall's *Mountaintop,* which he calls a "misadventure on Broadway which was an unconscionable demystification of the Martin Luther King legacy" ("Toward a Critical Vocabulary"). Doubtless, depicting King as occasionally profane and adulterous firmly situated Hall's play within a form of social realism that Harrison could not endorse. However, it is in many ways this very demystification that materialist feminist scholars champion in art that emerges from a call for social justice. Extending this critique, many diaspora studies scholars have addressed the dangers of a blanket celebration of an idealized Afrocentrism. Stephen C. Ferguson's 2015 book, *Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness*, adopts a strict Marxist approach and argues that an overly idealized Afrocentrism creates, as Jennifer Jordan puts it, "a pristine paradise which could be as glorious as the imagination could make it" (qtd. in Ferguson 5). Ferguson offers this corrective: "Rather than start with an ideal (e.g., the Absolute Spirit) to be realized in the course of the historical

process, we must start with the mode of production, the relations of production, and their dialectical interaction with the social forms of consciousness manifested as the ideological superstructure" (5). Unlike Harrison, then, Ferguson warns us against an undue centrality of amorphous and shifting ideals of spirituality or other broad myth-based cultural characterizations. While such notions may emerge upon greater analysis, a scholar must begin with the material, the tangible, the political realities encountered and negotiated by artists and audiences. While I do not delve deeply into the means of production guiding the creation and performance of the drama of my study, I do look to the labor of the characters themselves and to the dramatic forms and embodied performance of these works.

This concrete, materialist approach accords in many ways with transnational feminist aims. Many such feminists have taken pains to expose the traps we as scholars and activists set for ourselves by failing to look to the material realities of specific sites. Guadeloupean scholar and novelist Maryse Condé explains the logic that guides the often-mythologized "homeland": "Everything prior to colonization was idealized. Consequently, from the image of Africa, the motherland, were carefully eradicated any blemishes such as domestic slavery, or tribal warfare, and the subjugation of women" (qtd. in Pinto 1). Condé and materialist feminist scholars and playwrights, then, urge us not to lose our critical faculties in a larger desire to condemn and expose the violence of (neo)colonization. These critical faculties are sharpened by the materialist feminist emphasis on intersectionality, which holds that a condemnation of racism and xenophobia must not lead to the sacrifice of an awareness of the dangers of patriarchy and internal political strife.

The most succinct summary of the aims and challenges of African diaspora studies that I have located appears in Samantha Pinto's 2013 book, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational*

Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic. Pinto argues, "Diaspora demands the specificity of times, places, names, and dates, all the while claiming its multitudes as its major strength, its global significance" (7).[2] Pinto tackles this challenge of specificity and global significance with an emphasis on formal innovation. Her diasporic texts include novels, plays, and nonfiction narratives, all of which bend their genres. Like Harrison, she professes a desire to move beyond mimetic realism because, she claims, her non-realistic chosen texts do not "shy away from the failures, traumas, and unfinished business of diaspora flows and gender's difficult place in those networks" (5). The focus on form provides Pinto a concrete point of entry for her own feminist approach that negotiates the polar challenges of specificity and global significance. Ultimately, she defends her interest in aesthetics as a means to read gender and race relations across cultural difference without discordantly subjecting the works to western value systems: "A critical engagement with aesthetics, as not just a form but *the* form of politics, moves us into the systemic analysis of how gender and race operate—for better and for worse—through form and through the complex relationship between language and the order(s) of diaspora" (3). Pinto positions art as fundamentally political and, in so doing, affirms the value of literary analysis as both cultural analysis and political activism.[3]

What is generally lacking in the budding scholarly conversation surrounding the works of my study, then, is an approach like Pinto's that applies a formal analysis through a diasporic lens. Both the playwrights' forms and my analysis emerge from this diasporic lens, taking the

[2] Although Pinto does not draw on Una Chaudhury in framing her approach, her emphasis on place echoes Chaudhury's concept of "platiality": "a recognition of the signifying power and political potential of *specific places*" (5, emphasis original).

[3] Her point draws on Jacques Rancière's contention: "Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility" (qtd. in Pinto 210).

plays' forms as they come, rather than first introducing a single structure and measuring the works against it. Paul Carter Harrison's work reveals the need for diasporic analysis, certainly, but his work functions as a call to action for playwrights and black-owned theatres, and thus does not offer in-depth readings of the works themselves. The clear exception to this gap in drama and performance analysis becomes a central focus of this study: Soyika Diggs Colbert's black movements—discussed below. Nonetheless, as I will show, even Colbert's theory emphasizes a national drama in ways that deemphasize diasporic aesthetics and points of connection. In these pages, I offer such a diasporic lens, merging transnational feminist theory, critical race studies, affect theory, and performance analysis. Before delving into the details of Colbert's theory and its intersections with my own methodology, an overview of transnational feminist theory is needed, as this work informs and shapes the entire study.

Transnational Feminist Theory

The most influential theoretical texts guiding my thoughts emerge from a group of feminist scholars with a range of titles: intersectional feminists, transnational feminists, women-of-color feminists, third world feminists, etc. For my purposes, I will use the terms intersectional and transnational. The first emphasizes these theorists' awareness that feminism cannot achieve its ends—or even adequately state its mission—without recognizing the ways that oppressions can be compounded when a person holds various minoritized identities, including class, race, national origin, sexuality, and gender. A feminism that concerns itself solely with questions of gender will fail to recognize the full scope of the action needed to address intersecting oppressions. The second evidences their global awareness and their often complex, shifting national identifications. "Transnational" may carry limitations as a term, as it seems to suggest that these identities remain discrete and clearly delineated, allowing for clean and neat transitions

from geographic site to site—as though one can be "this" here and "that" there. The use of transnational in my work is primarily indebted to the contributions of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander. In their 1997 edited collection *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures,* the authors opted for the use of transnational feminisms over international feminisms because they felt that international had become subsumed into discourses that reinforced the hierarchies of west over east and global north over global south. In seeking to avoid the sway of free market capitalism and what we might call today marketplace feminism (which shares many of the problems of white feminism), the authors found themselves in need of a term that allowed them to discuss globalization. The authors settled on transnational for its affordances in making global commonalities visible, while still preserving the particularities of place and material realities: "Grounding analyses in particular local, feminist praxis is necessary, but we also need to understand the local in relation to larger, cross-national processes" (xix).

The influence of Mohanty and Alexander's scholarship can be seen in the proliferation of feminisms labeled transnational in the decades since their embrace of the term. The wide use of the term has resulted in much helpful scholarship, but also in some slippages that have given rise to critique. In their collection *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010), Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar present a range of the uses of transnational, and in so doing they summarize the findings of Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2001), who argue, "[Transnational functions] as an alternative to the problematic of the global and the international, articulated primarily by western and Euro-American second-wave feminists as well as by multinational corporations, for which 'becoming global' marks an expansion into new markets" (Swarr and Nagar 4). Swarr and Nagar themselves take issue with this usage. Certainly, they

agree that corporate and white “feminisms” need to be critiqued and exposed for their centrism and erasure, but they find that the way in which western academics have gone about this critique insufficient due to a lack of specifics: “the specific ways in which particular transnational collaborations and solidarities can be articulated, enacted, mediated, translated, and represented . . . have remained largely peripheral or implicit” (5). As a white woman writing in the United States, I seek to keep this critique fully in view. The emergent lesson for transnational feminist praxis and theory is that the global must be viewed through its impact on the local. Rather than relying on connections forged through grand ideas of cross-cultural shared suffering, only in identifying how the forces of globalization affect local material realities can any specific plans to address those realities be identified. In positioning themselves as scholar-activists, Mohanty and Alexander (2010) explain that their use of transnational feminist praxis is “anchored in our own locations in the global North, and in the commitment to work systematically and overtly against racialized, heterosexist, imperial, corporatist projects that characterize North American global adventures” (25). Similarly, my interests and conclusions will necessarily trace global concerns, but will remain situated within the complexities of the material realities and theatre spaces of the United States.

The theorist most often credited with reshaping the conversation by challenging western hegemonic (white) feminism is Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Mohanty’s influential essay, "Under Western Eyes" (1984) explores the tendency of western feminist discourses to amalgamate Third World women into one monolith. This singular notion of the Third World Woman is constructed by a combination of gender difference and Third World Difference. Mohanty explains that hegemonic feminism creates Third World Difference as “a stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” (19). She identifies six ways

in which Third World women are defined: (1) victims of male violence, (2) universal dependents, (3) married women that are victims of the colonial process, (4) women constructed within the group of a family, (5) women defined by religious ideologies, and (6) women defined by their developing-country status. Her later book, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), republishes this piece alongside newer essays arguing for a fusion of theory and praxis; Mohanty calls for anti-capitalist critique, decolonization, and solidarity in feminist efforts to mobilize against global capitalism. She defines these efforts in distinctly materialist terms: "Anticapitalist feminism links capitalism as an economic system and culture of consumption centrally to racist, sexist, heterosexist, and nationalist relations of rule in the production of capitalist/corporate citizenship" (183). Mohanty's theory influences drama and performance scholarship most centrally through her call to challenge western orientation. Her focus on Third World women workers makes possible mobilization and organizing transnationally because it challenges western scholars and citizens to see these women as agents, not victims or objects; with this focus, women transnationally can identify potential commonalities that can promote solidarity. Drama and performance by authors of the African diaspora often depict these commonalities, and the scholar can draw out these connections.

While Mohanty's inspiration for drama and performance analysis largely calls for a shift in the scholar's worldview, Angela Davis's work takes these transnational concerns of the previous theorists and applies them directly to the United States' role in globalization. Her piece, "A Vocabulary for Feminist Praxis: On War and Radical Critique" (2008), presents feminist methodologies that critique double standards for national issues versus United States neoimperialist international issues. Using the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as previous U.S.-led massacres in Vietnam, Davis argues for feminist interventions in the

language used to describe and justify U.S. actions. She argues that the feminism with which she identifies does not "assume that democracy requires capitalism" and remains skeptical of "the pitfalls of the formal 'rights' structure of capitalist democracy" (21). Central to her approach is an understanding of feminism that is not issue-based, or focused on broad abstractions such as gender equality, but instead on "feminist methodologies" (22). For instance, she takes on assumptions that disturbing images of war and U.S. atrocities will be sufficient to instigate resistance, and she uses Abu Ghraib as her example. She argues, "As feminists, we cannot relinquish our own agency to the image. We cannot even assume that the image has a self-evident relation to its object. And we must consider the political economy that constitutes the environment within which images are created and consumed" (24). She also emphasizes a need to break down divisions between us/them, or more specifically, prisonization/militarization (25). In addressing the latter duality, she calls for a recognition of the violence pervading each to be placed on a continuum, allowing the relationships between them to emerge. In a series of questions, she asks, "Why do we cry out against secret [CIA] prisons, when only a small fraction of the population has ever bothered to find out what happens behind the walls of US state and federal prisons[?]" (25). This blended, fuller image encourages feminist critical methodologies that refuse to toe the nationalist, xenophobic line. While I do not adapt Davis's theory into a specific method of performance analysis, her critiques of United States' capitalism help concretize the need for the playwrights' focus on globalization and consumerism.

The most central transnational feminist theorist of my study is M. Jacqui Alexander, who offers a theoretical method of analysis that I do adapt for drama and performance analysis: scrambling. In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), Alexander identifies common threads of sexual politics and justifications of subjugation across an extremely wide expanse of space and time.

She asserts that these threads evidence the palimpsestic nature of time and, in so doing, challenge the popular fiction of its constantly progressive trajectory. Building on the work of Stuart Hall and Ella Shohat, Alexander calls for the scrambling of time, which will "make visible . . . the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar" (190). Ultimately, Alexander seeks to disrupt the apparent neutrality of modernity and expose its underlying violence. She chooses to illustrate this violence by scrambling three sites: Spanish colonization in 1513, the neo-colonial state's legislation of homosexuality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas in the 1980s and 90s, and the neo-imperialist militarization she identified in the United States at the time of her publication in 2005. By finding like forms of oppression and ideology across these apparently disparate sites, she exposes the illusion of a "here and now" versus a "then and there" binary, as well as its damaging effects. Many of the play texts of interest for my work incorporate scrambling reminiscent of Alexander's approach, whether that happens through blending disparate theatrical forms or thematic elements. Additionally, the scholar can place apparently disparate play texts in conversation with one another to similarly disrupt oversimplified historical narratives.

Methodology

Transnational feminist theory grounds and connects the multidisciplinary approach of my methodology, which includes affect theory, transnational feminist scrambling, and performance theory that is intimately connected with critical race theory. In my focus on form, I examine the ways in which these plays engage with or part from traditional western dramatic forms—with a particular emphasis on realism—and what elements draw on the multifaceted influence of African diasporic dramatic forms. Such a focus will support my efforts to trouble the national boundaries often placed on these writers, setting their work up as a vital opportunity to trace the

global landscape that informs it and thereby disrupt the persistent centering of white, western, neoimperial worldviews. This focus also extends Harrison's African diasporic performance beyond the limited boundaries implied in his usual discussion of the term, offering a more accurate and inclusive periodization of these contemporary artists.

Even as I read the works of this study as deeply political, the playwrights themselves often explicitly position their work as activism. I find that such intents can best be explored by fusing affect and cognitive science theories with transnational feminisms. My use of affect theory and cognitive science enables me to reveal the ways in which these activist works are designed to impact their audiences. Carolyn Pedwell, Rhonda Blair, Nicola Shaughnessy, Amy Cook, and other affect and cognitive science theorists guide my reading of playwrights' texts, staged choices, and projected audience reactions. I engage with the themes of these works and their staged realizations, following Angela Davis's and M. Jacqui Alexander's theories that "scramble" geographical and imagined spaces, as well as time periods. Some of this work will examine the ways in which play texts that ostensibly concern themselves with United States' current events or internal policies in fact reveal the global reach of late capital and this country's neoimperialism. Other parts of it will investigate the ways in which United States-authored depictions of African sites suggest opportunities or challenges to forming global, strategic coalitions for social justice. In transnational feminist hands, the theory of scrambling has been deployed to read our current realities and recent histories, so it may initially appear an odd choice for a study of drama and performance. However, I transform scrambling into a method of performance analysis by applying its principles to set design and embodied actions onstage—an intervention that benefits hugely from the shared investments I read in scrambling and the final theory included in my methodology: black movements.

Soyica Diggs Colbert's theory of black movements forms the perfect confluence of the theories discussed so far. Colbert's theory comes from the world of theatre and performance studies and, in some ways, it answers Harrison's call for African diasporic performance. It functions as a clever fusion of performance theory, critical race theory, and—as I argue—transnational feminist scrambling. In keeping with Harrison's charge to avoid what he terms "dramas of the black experience," Colbert's theory highlights black performance that refuses to dwell on black suffering. She positions the theory as explicitly political and revolutionary and defines black movements as "embodied actions (a change in position, place, posture, or orientation) that draw from the imagination and the past to advance political projects" and adds that they "participate in political movements by creating links across time and space" (*Black Movements* 5, 19). I read this final phrase as a clear parallel to the aims of transnational feminist scrambling as I define and use it in this study, which seeks to make visible the transnational shared investments often obscured through globalization and absorbed racism and xenophobia. Colbert reads instances of "speech acts, mimicry, oral expression, and acts of disruption" as black movements (7). These embodied actions onstage and the political potentiality they produce offstage combine to form what Colbert terms "freedom practices." Freedom practices in women of color feminisms are understood as methodologies – and in that way, they make sense to align with performance theory. Colbert explains that freedom "becomes a lived and fleeting experience; it occurs in the movements of the artist-activist but may not be reduced to a list of finite goals. As Grace Kyungwon Hong argues, 'women of color feminist practice [is] a methodology for comparative analysis that allows us to relationally understand the possible links between very disparate formations'" (108). Clearly, Colbert strongly identifies with and aligns black movements with women of color feminisms. My study takes this affinity a step further by

fusing transnational feminist scrambling as performance theory with black movements. In Colbert's readings of American drama, black movements most often reveal black American traditions—traditions which she certainly understands to be African diasporic in nature, but which she centers first as characteristic of the United States. When merged with black movements, my transnational feminist framework reveals the ways in which the staged action and sets of these plays create "links across time and space" on a global scale, making visible a full chain of shared oppressions and potential coalition. In service of these ends, my approach also makes space for analysis of dialogue, imagery, and plot structure, fusing performance analysis with traditional literary analysis.

Overview of Chapters

In my first chapter, "Transnational Feminism, Americanness, and Queer Dreaming in Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Brother/Sister Plays,"* I adopt Paul Carter Harrison's term, African diasporic performance, to draw out its meaning through McCraney's triptych. As discussed above, Harrison holds up McCraney's work as a fine example of his term, while excluding many of the later works of my study from the categorization. This chapter reveals the important affordances of Harrison's term and acts as an opening of its potentiality with broader application. The chapter itself examines McCraney's use of Yoruba ritual and possession, arguing that McCraney transforms these formal elements into queering forces; in keeping with Colbert's black movements, diasporic rituals and staged action radically reject themes of persistent black suffering. Each play in the triptych features complicated explorations of sexuality that avoid simple binaries and the mores of heterosexual monogamous coupling, and queerness itself becomes a source of cosmic power. McCraney revels in the liminality of a queer—or "sweet"—identity, exhibiting through his queer characters not the often homophobic violence of our

current moment, but a radically imagined, more just future across sexuality, race, and gender. Therefore, I position McCraney's Yoruba performance influences, particularly the functions of ritual and possession, as queering forces.

The second chapter of this study, "Realism, Activism, and Affect: Reimagining African Women at War," examines the transnational feminist activism of Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2008) and Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* (2009) through the lens of cognitive science and affect theory. The chapter explores the playwrights' use of confrontational and imaginative empathy and its effort to spur their audiences into action against the human rights abuses they reveal onstage. In keeping with an ongoing feminist scholarly effort to reclaim realism as a socially-impactful form of theatre, this chapter further argues that these works' general adherence to the tenets of realism afford them the full impact of their intentions when they break these boundaries, asking audiences to become again aware of their position as both audience members in a theatrical space and, more importantly, beneficiaries of the injustices staged in front of them. The works of this chapter—more so than any others of the study—demand a theoretical focus on cognitive science and affect theory via empathy because they center their action entirely in women's created communities in war-torn areas of Africa. Given transnational feminist aims to decenter and dismantle white western supremacy, presenting these worlds to western audiences must be done with great forethought as to the assumptions and responses they will provoke—and the lens of confrontational and imaginative empathy that reveals these works' care in representing stereotyped populations. Although these theoretical lenses do not directly extend into the final two chapters, the function of affect in these works bears striking similarities to the function of Colbert's black movements, which feature prominently in the remainder of the study.

The final two chapters gather these threads and center the study firmly in its primary aims: to frame transnational feminist theory as a lens suited to theatre and performance, and—most importantly—to reveal the ways in which the playwrights of my study are extending the goals of transnational feminism through their distinctly black and African diasporic work. In these chapters, I adopt M. Jacqui Alexander's concept of scrambling and extend its application to drama and performance analysis by reframing its function as a black movement—Colbert's performance analysis theory. Through merging these theoretical lenses, I am able to extend Colbert's excellent analysis of contemporary black theatre while emphasizing a concept not stated quite so plainly in her analyses: these works' capacity to critique and reshape audience understanding of the sociopolitical realities in which they are set and in which they are performed.

Chapter Three, "Globalization and Black Movements: 'Scrambling' Spaces in Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter's *In the Continuum* and Robert O'Hara's *Antebellum,*" explores the plays' performance and imagery of the African diaspora to make visible the vibrant lives that might otherwise have remained obscured through globalization and absorbed bigotry. I find that this use of scrambling helps to define Paul Carter Harrison's sometimes unclear term, African diasporic performance. *In the Continuum* (2005) scrambles South Central, L.A. and Harare, Zimbabwe to demonstrate unexpected continuities in two women's lives, disrupting reductive stories of Africa as a monolith, and of AIDS as a condition that no longer happens "here." *Antebellum* (2009) scrambles 1936 Berlin with 1939 Atlanta as the city prepares for the *Gone with the Wind* world premiere. The set design and the actors' performances as they move between these blended worlds reveals the clear relationship between American plantations, slavery, and Jim Crow and Nazi antisemitism and racism. Two ostensibly discrete geographic

sites are crossed and reformed through these various intersections, demonstrating shared oppressive logics and psychologies that do not prominently feature in typical narratives of the American role in World War II.

The final chapter, "Neoimperialism in Contemporary Black Drama: Examining Katori Hall's *Hurt Village* and Lynn Nottage's *Sweat,*" employs the same fusion of transnational feminist scrambling and black movements, but to markedly different works. As the chapter relates, transnational feminisms take particular interest in the material realities resulting from neoimperialism, capitalism, globalization, and these forces' effects on the western nations most responsible for their proliferation. *Hurt Village* (2012) scrambles Memphis, Tennessee and an unnamed desolate warzone—but one that audiences are meant to interpret as Iraq or Afghanistan—in order to demonstrate the local impact of increasing militarization—both abroad and among domestic police forces—and the persistent tradition of the disposable black soldier in the United States. *Sweat* (2017) disrupts linear time with a structure that scrambles two time periods—a mere eight years apart—that exposes the economic inequalities worsened by the deindustrialization of the United States. Nottage's work implies that the working class's objections are oftentimes subdued through misdirection that grows the felon class. Issues like the War on Drugs, discarded soldiers, union dissolution, and the growing felon class remain in the United States' imagination largely national issues, but Hall's and Nottage's works reveal them to be imbricated in the larger system of the nation's neoimperial project. The playwrights accomplish this aim both via the worlds they create with their historical/theoretical scrambling, and through embodied movements onstage, which I argue should be considered forms of Colbert's black movements.

As a whole, this project advocates for greater scholarly application of transnational feminist lenses to contemporary black theatre written and performed primarily in the United States. This lens enables a recognition that this work is not interested in defining United States' theatre or character against other nations' aesthetics or ways of being. Rather, through the playwrights' intentional adoption of African diasporic performance and cultural history, this theatre offers a distinctly black framework through which to examine how the United States—its cultures, policies, and imperialism—impact the broader world. The playwrights' critiques and the forms in which they express them are insightful and timely, and I hope that my exploration helps inspire a more robust scholarly conversation surrounding their work.

Chapter One:

Transnational Feminism, Americanness, and Queer Dreaming in Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Brother/Sister Plays*

One characteristic evident in much of the work of this study is formal innovation that takes African performance traditions as a key inspiration. I will examine these influences in Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Brother/Sister Plays* (2009). By exploring his use of Yoruba cosmology and performance traditions, I will reveal the ways in which this author challenges reductive definitions of blackness and Americanness as singular, discrete identities. At the same time, this chapter also seeks to make space in the fraught distinctions between "black theatre" and "theatre by a playwright who happens to be black." While McCraney has been hailed as an artist of the former category, many other playwrights in this study often have been placed—with a notably dismissive tone—into the latter. Through examining the praise McCraney has received for his distinctly black theatre, or, as Paul Carter Harrison has termed it, African diasporic performance, this chapter develops groundwork through which to compare and demonstrate the similar interventions of the other artists of my study who might otherwise be excluded from the category.

In what may initially appear to be a contradiction to my stated thesis here, it is evident that McCraney and his work are invested in defining Americanness. In interviews, McCraney repeatedly positions the plays that comprise the triptych—*The Brothers Size*, *In the Red and Brown Water*, and *Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet*—as "American stories," oftentimes intentionally in contrast to those interviewers who insist on the evident African influences (e.g. Reed). As a result, McCraney's words complicate the placement of his work within the scholarly debate alluded to above—a fact that has been unevenly acknowledged in current criticism and

scholarship examining his work. Randy Gener's discussion of McCraney's triptych in *American Theatre* argues that the Yoruba influence "allows us, perhaps, to think of the *Brother/Sister Plays* as a joyous re-constituting of the shattered African gourd, the water-filled calabash whose broken pieces and healing contents have scattered all over the world" (26). McCraney himself has rejected the hybrid identity of "African-American" that would clearly position himself as one piece of this shattered gourd. McCraney recounts a conversation he has had countless times about his ancestry:

> I said, "Well, my grandmother's grandmother is Irish."
>
> "Are you trying to be funny?"
>
> "No, I'm not trying to be funny at all, but you're trying to make me say that I'm AFRICAN American, and I think I'm just American. I'm American and I'm black. That's pretty much all I can give you." (qtd. in Brodersen 17)

His insistence on this point has challenged and frustrated those who have been eager to fold McCraney into the diaspora, a frustration Gener's interview reveals in his playful aside, "Perplexed, I wonder if I am talking to a trickster!" (26).

Critics and scholars of McCraney's work must distinguish between rejection and strategic prioritization. Upon closer review, McCraney distances himself from the label "African-American" not as a rejection of Africanness, but as a casting-off of the persistent assumption that, in Toni Morrison's famous words, "American means white" (47). His corrective to this white supremacist default appears repeatedly in his discussion of the triptych and its influences: "Yes, you can trace the myths to Africa, but that's not how I learned them. The *orisha* stories I learned are American myths, not West African stories" (qtd. in Gener 26). McCraney seeks to establish these Yoruba beliefs as American beliefs and demonstrates how they have been filtered

through Christian frameworks—particularly his own Baptist upbringing. The hybridity he identifies as distinctly American further appears in his discussion of San Pere, the imagined Louisiana city on the bayou in which the triptych is set:

> The two portions of the earth meet in the Gulf of Mexico, and that gulf is a rich and fecund place. It's got old nasty stories about conquistadors and pirates, and French and Spanish and African blood mixed there to make this incredible hodgepodge [. . .] For me, the bayou is about a rich history that's essentially American. You cannot find a place more American than Louisiana, than Florida, than Alabama, and in that gulf is where it all meets together. (qtd. in Brodersen 8)

These interviews reveal McCraney's vision of an America that is fundamentally diasporic, and to acknowledge the distinct Americanness of diaspora is not to reject African heritage and the ways that heritage has influenced his drama. Rather, he forcefully reimagines an American drama that is not cut short by an assumption of whiteness and European dramatic forms. In illustrating this intervention in the triptych, I will explain McCraney's use of Yoruba cosmology and performance traditions, build on Soyica Diggs Colbert's excellent performance theory of "black movements," and further this conversation through transnational feminisms and queer theory. Ultimately, McCraney's work centers on notions of race, nation, and gender that are queered and fundamentally intersectional, and his embrace of liminality in these spaces offers a more comprehensive vision of Americanness in the theatre and beyond. Onstage, through his use of Yoruba ritual and possession, I will argue that McCraney transforms this liminality into a mode of performance that—in keeping with Colbert's black movements—accesses a more just future across sexuality, race, and gender.

Emerging Scholarly Conversation on the *Brothers/Sisters Plays*

As the scholarly conversation emerging on McCraney's work reveals, his experimental form and specific use of Yoruba cosmology in the triptych have gained notice for the ways African influences have long shaped and invigorated theatre—and particularly black theatre—in the United States. The triptych has been praised for drawing attention to those theatrical traditions by making them evident, and thus has served in part to define a new generation of black theatre in the United States—and the political and social impact of that new theatre. Paul Carter Harrison has long been committed to amplifying these theatre makers' voices. Later in this chapter, I will take issue with the narrowness of Harrison's scope, but as McCraney's work gains his unequivocal praise, I will first undertake to define Harrison's ideal. In a 2009 piece, "Black Theatre at the Millennial Crossroads," Harrison rejects an oversimplified monolith of black theatre and proposes instead two camps: "African Diasporic Performance" for those works he embraces, and "American dramas of the black experience" for those that he finds less interesting (136). Leaving the latter category for the moment, I will examine the former. Harrison explains, "At the core of African Diasporic performance is spirituality [. . .]. African-Americans, like all Africans in the Diaspora, are a spiritual people who require rituals that reveal themselves beyond the limits of material reality of domestic life" (137). In performance, then, Harrison describes this theatre as "the rhythmic spectacle of language, movement, and sound rooted deeply in the social negotiations of church, Carnival, and the call-and-response practices of collective experience" ("Praise/Word" 5). In McCraney's work, Harrison finds the ritual he seeks. The arguable essentialism of this assertion is likely to prompt some hedging from McCraney himself; not only does he specifically disavow an African-American identity, but also his blanket assertion of spirituality as a forceful means of union may seem a bridge too far. Nonetheless, ritual does guide the triptych. Harrison argues that the triptych, or specifically *The*

Brothers Size, inspects "the layers of symbolic references retained in the *metalanguage* of the African Diaspora" (132).[4] Harrison locates the significance of African diasporic performance in its potential for liberation, arguing that African traditions that trickle down through the diaspora have an important effect: "The resultant liberating power of these collective invocations of *spirit* is a testament to the retention of expressive practices stored in *memory*" (129).

While some of Harrison's broader claims of an essential, diasporic spirituality may cause trepidation, Soyica Diggs Colbert's excellent study, *The African American Theatrical Body,* ultimately reaches a similar conclusion about the liberatory potential of this new black theatre. In her epilogue Colbert positions McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water* within the broader framework of what she terms "black movements." She explains:

> I define black movements as embodied actions (i.e. floating) that further political movements (i.e., the pursuit of black women's bodily freedom) that in turn rearrange time and space [. . .] political practices but not ones whose duration can be measured solely in quantifiable, serial time. Rather, black movements reshape temporalities in order to reorganize the social and cultural fields that facilitate the social and physical deaths of black people. (265)

Colbert's argument hinges on her claim that these works transform time—that they can alter the definitiveness of history and projected futures. Her approach fuses readings of dramatic plot structure and performance and frames the works' disruptions and reimaginings as acts of creation with liberatory potential. Colbert finds particular promise in the act of creation because it enables

[4] It should be noted that Harrison's praise of McCraney's work as African Diasporic performance is significant because it is so rarely bestowed. Harrison provides only two exceptions to his broader claim that "most expressive output of new black work developed at white institutions is usually subordinated by the popular receptivity of the content and systems of critical logic codified by the aesthetics of the dominant culture" ("Black Theatre" 132). Those exceptions are Will Power's *Seven* at the New York Theatre Workshop and McCraney's *The Brothers Size* at the Public Theatre.

audiences to imagine alternatives to the status quo. Black movements open up this space of potentiality, which although neither past, present, or future, manages to encompass all of these things at once. In her focus on form and performance in *Red and Brown Water,* Colbert ultimately finds that McCraney's black movements position "the body, place, and time on the move in order to extend the life of black performance" (263). Colbert's terminology nicely conceptualizes the liberatory potential of the varied theatrical forms embraced by the authors discussed in my study and will be a useful point of reference throughout; I will explain her concept further in context of McCraney's work, expand the boundaries she sets, and in future chapters demonstrate the broader application of her term. In this chapter, I argue that black movements, which already capture the intersections of race and gender, must be further expanded to encompass queerness as a liberatory force. McCraney's triptych accomplishes exactly that.

In my study, playwrights are connected by the liberatory potential of their art; it pursues and presents revealing critiques of the current reality in the United States, while often radically imagining a more just future. Scholars interested in black theatre in the United States, and African diasporic performance in particular, often cite this potential. In "The Theory of *Ase*," a study of black American theatre influenced by Yoruba traditions, Esiaba Irobi explains, "The dramas are therefore structured to work through a medium of an actor or actors who, empowered phenomenologically by their personal or collective *ase* (creative agency), transform themselves into agents for change and usher in a new spiritual and political insight into the lives of their immediate community" (23). Naturally, the political insight offered in the drama text depends on the experiences and commitments of the playwright. McCraney's work is remarkable for the intersectionality evident in the triptych. In reading *Red and Brown Water,* Colbert focuses on

black movements' ability to reimagine racial and gendered dynamics. I am interested in that capacity as well, but McCraney's work demands a further intersectional reading that places queerness in the forefront. Each play in the triptych features complicated explorations of sexuality that avoid simple binaries and the mores of heterosexual monogamous coupling, and queerness itself becomes a source of cosmic power. Therefore, I argue that McCraney's Yoruba influences discussed below, particularly the functions of ritual and possession, must be positioned as queering forces. Harry Elam gestures toward the broad potential of possession in August Wilson's work, saying, "[T]he African diasporic experience of possession is not simply about harnessing the spirit of the god, it is about expressing a subversive freedom, a *jouissance* away from social, cultural, and especially gendered constraints" (Elam 204). McCraney's work is attuned to these gendered constraints and has demonstrated his commitment to advancing feminism both in his work and in interviews by consistently drawing attention to black women playwrights. Furthermore, in a speech for the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society titled "Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theatre of Be Longing," McCraney demonstrated his understanding of the ways in which forms of oppression are linked, arguing, "Homophobia is just misogyny aimed at men." Homophobia can, of course, be directed at women and transwomen as well, but by strategically aligning misogyny with the homophobia directed at gay or queer-spectrum men, McCraney adopts a queer lens to create solidarity across multiple forms of oppression. Onstage, through his use of Yoruba ritual and possession, that lens becomes a mode of performance in keeping with the liberatory potential of Colbert's black movements.

Yoruba Cosmology and Diasporic Performance Traditions

McCraney's connection to Yoruba cosmology and performance is, as he notes, fundamentally diasporic. For him, Yoruba cosmology is also an American cosmology, and the

performance traditions he draws upon can be characterized as Yoruba diasporic performance. Joni L. Jones argues that Yoruba diasporic performance is "spiritually and aesthetically-based" and is "embodied knowledge":

> The Yoruba diaspora as I discuss it in this essay—as embodied knowledge dispersed around the world, primarily in the U.S., the Caribbean, and South America—complicates and challenges a Yoruba diaspora based on race, and thrives on the adaptation of spiritual rites rather than the identification of cultural retentions that anxiously trace back to a place of origin. (322)

Jones's assertion, then, loosens diasporic performance from its origins, while insisting on the broader connections of spiritual belief systems and the aesthetics that comprise related rituals. Her central example comes from the practice of calling the orisha (or spirits, and spelled orisa in Jones's work). Jones surmises that diasporic drama so often invokes or otherwise characterizes the orisha because the forces the orisha represent are fundamentally global and without borders. When staged by actors, the orisha give anthropomorphized form to wind, thunder, oceans, etc., and their powers can be shaped to suit whatever region in which they are invoked (323). Despite this malleability, the aesthetics by which that invocation takes place are markedly consistent: "Spoken word, music, dance, oriki [praise poetry], drumming, and chanting are all employed as needed" (324).

McCraney's triptych unmistakably engages with Yoruba diasporic performance just as Jones describes, making transparent a Yoruba influence not always so clearly displayed in other contemporary black American drama. Scholars highlighting these influences have often lamented the fact that this engagement is often missed entirely, misinterpreted as European in origin, or simply ascribed to American black culture, rather than traced back to African roots.

Although McCraney strategically embraces its Americanness, the triptych's engagement with Yoruba cosmology also forces audiences to question Eurocentric assumptions and interpret more deeply. McCraney's stated goals for each of the *Brother/Sister Plays* provide insight into the progression he envisions:

> In *The Brothers Size* I was trying to explore rhythms, drum-like, but in the voice. In *In the Red and Brown Water* I begin exploring the mixing of two stories from two different cultures—*Yerma* and Oba—and how they mix, and essentially how those mixtures are what make up the people in Cuba and the Spanish Caribbean, African and European Spanish. And in *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet* I explored what the absence of those direct links feels like in African-Americans today. I haven't proved or unproved anything. Just exploring and using what I know of my life in the South in the swampy areas of the Everglades and Homestead, FL. (qtd. in McCarter Audience Guide 5-6)

These inspirations evidence several facts about McCraney's work. Clearly, the tension within the African-American identity that McCraney has personally eschewed is present. While elements of Yoruba culture—both cosmology and aesthetics—guide the form and content of the first two plays, McCraney makes the absence of a diasporic identity and clear cultural connections to Africa a jumping-off point for *Marcus*. This statement, combined with the frequency of this topic in interviews about the triptych, reveals just how central the identity-based tensions—Africanness/Americanness—are to the triptych. At the same time, McCraney's belief in Americanness as fundamentally diasporic is equally evident in his fusion of Spanish and Yoruba texts. As he has previously argued, "It just gets complicated, because at this point nobody's one thing anymore, but everybody needs to identify you" (qtd. in Brodersen 19). The frustration

apparent in these words further evidences McCraney's desire to combat reductive parameters of Americanness and blackness. McCraney's multivalent characters and wide cultural influences help operate against the Eurocentrism and whiteness that remain commonplace in American culture, popular theatrical criticism, and scholarship.

In keeping with Jones's description, the Yoruba diasporic performance influences are most immediately evident in the naming and plots of the triptych. Nearly all of the characters have names that are variants of Yoruba orisha. For instance, Oya is orisha of the Niger River, wind, and storms; Marcus's second name, Eshu, is a variant of Elegba or Elegua, orisha of the crossroads, messenger of the gods, and trickster (McKelvey 15). And while McCraney prefaces *In the Red and Brown Water* with a brief statement acknowledging Federico García Lorca's influence, "A Fast and Loose Play on Spanish *Yerma*," he also credits "African Oya/Oba." It is, in part, a retelling of a sacred tale from Yoruba cosmology. In a collected version of these tales, William Russell Bascom captures many variations of Oya/Oba's origin story told in the Americas. One such variation has Oshoun—a more favored wife of Shango—trick Oba by assuring her she would gain greater favor if she made Shango a soup with her ear. Bascom summarizes that Oba "followed the advice of Oshoun, cut off an ear, and cooked it in a soup for Shango. He showed no pleasure in seeing Oba disfigured and covered with blood, and he found the dish that she served repugnant" (4). When Oba realizes that she has been tricked and that Oshoun's ears are intact, the two women begin to fight. Then, "Shango flew into a rage, shot fire from his mouth, and thundered at his wives, who fled in fright and turned themselves into the two rivers that bear their names today" (4). Similarly, in McCraney's telling, Shun—the woman with whom Shango[5] has a child—is the cause of Oya's jealousy that drives her to sever her ear.

[5] McCraney adopts these spellings (Oya, rather than Oba, and Shun, rather than Osun) for the triptych; many varied spellings exist for orisha.

While the characters' names and stories are the most evident connection to Yoruba culture, Yoruba diasporic performance traditions evidence themselves in the triptych through the ritualized performance style. Although Colbert does not present her concept of black movements as a direct descendant of Yoruba performance traditions, my explanation of the Yoruba concepts of possession and community in the context of performance will make the connection clear. The theory and belief system surrounding these concepts is called *àshe,* or sometimes *ase.* While studies of McCraney's work may mention *àshe*/*ase,* detailed readings have yet to emerge. However, such readings are common in scholarship of August Wilson's work—who mentored McCraney during his time at Yale. Of these readings of Wilson, Harry Elam's *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* remains particularly influential. Elam distinguishes Yoruba belief systems from Christianity, and in so doing, frames Yoruba performance in terms of unity, or what I will group under the heading of "possession." He explains that *àshe/ase* does not accept the Christian divisions of flesh and God, or body and soul; "the spirit of God is not outside but within the body of the characters" and this unity is, he argues, what allows *àshe/ase* performance to be "a combination of religious and political power" (169). For Elam, this potential relies on diasporic connections—a conscious embrace of African heritage. In reading Wilson's plays, he says, "In times of social and spiritual need, enactments of spirit within the plays act as 'memory codes' resurrecting and reconnecting the African and African American past with the present, forging a way, for the future" (177). Elam's words here resonate with Colbert's later claims about the power of black movements to shift and reimagine temporalities.

This broader *àshe/ase* concept of unity in possession and how it affects performance gain clarity through McCraney's own explanations. In a video titled, "Tarell Alvin McCraney: On Yoruba Culture," McCraney explains his interpretation of possession in Yoruba performance. He

disrupts the Americanized concept of possession as an abdication of responsibility. This understanding, drawn from cultural influences like *The Exorcist*, holds that when possessed, a person is not themselves, but instead has been taken over by an outside force, creating a fundamental disjunction between possessor and possessed.[6] In acting, this is tantamount to popular understandings of Method acting—that the actor becomes the character, and somehow loses any notion of their offstage self. In his understanding of Yoruba diasporic performance, McCraney explains, "When in possession, you are more yourself than you've ever been in your entire life. It's when a part of you that you're hiding from the rest of us starts to come forward, and so you're fully aware of what's going on." McCraney's interpretation somewhat aligns with other scholarly interpretations of possession. J.C. De Graft's essay, "Roots in African Drama and Theatre," defines possession as the line an actor walks: "he knows that no matter how deeply he immerses himself in the role of the fictional character there is always a psychological point of safety beyond which he dare not go, lest he be swept out of his depth and get carried away on the uncertain currents of hysteria and ecstasy"—meaning the goal is not possession, but its brink (22). McCraney's understanding of possession initially appears to be more secularized, conceptualizing the actor and character as a dual form of possession in a single body. This does not, however, preclude a spiritual element, as McCraney has long been inspired by his Miami community's Santerias, who would come up to him as a child and tell him he was touched and blessed. McCraney does not reject the notion that he might be possessed by external forces that have driven him in his pursuit of storytelling.

[6] Although McCraney himself does not make this comparison, I add that McCraney's understanding of possession should also be kept distinct from Richard Schechner's definition of "possession trance," in which he explains the performers "are like puppets; they do not control themselves or their actions" (193).

While spirituality undergirds McCraney's work, his praxis discussions focus on craft in terms of skill and training. McCraney's possession-as-hyperawareness emerges in the distinct style of his writing, most notably his choice to have characters both act and speak their stage directions—a choice consistent throughout the triptych. For instance, in *Brothers Size*, Ogun Size forces his brother Oshoosi to get up and come to work, saying, "You also forcing me to tell your parole officer / You won't work. / Smiles. / Ogun Size exits" (145). The actor simultaneously speaks and acts the stage directions. As here, these spoken stage directions frequently add humor and develop characters and their relationships. At the same time, they also allow the actors to draw attention to their own actions and the act of performing them. This consciousness ensures that the audience is not absorbed fully in the world of the play, but aware of themselves within a theatrical space. This description recalls Brechtian theatre, but to assume that Brecht is McCraney's key influence would be to fall into the same Eurocentrism that Paul Carter Harrison and others have long criticized. Colbert, by contrast, places McCraney's metatheatrical techniques within the long tradition in the United States of signifying, saying his work "signif[ies] on the theatrical innovation of Zora Neale Hurston in his use of bawdy comedy and folk traditions" (262). Colbert's argument furthers McCraney's own—that he and his work are American and black. This is true, and echoes of Hurston are clear. It is also true that signifying and other black performance traditions in the United States can and have been traced back to African roots. In discussing Yoruba performance—specifically *ase*—Kacke Gotrick explains this performance tradition includes "enactments that are at the same time presentational and representational, that are efficacious, and that are conceived of as a duality by the appropriate spectators, comprising reality and fiction simultaneously" (qtd. in Irobi 17). This simultaneous

duality—actor/character and fully developed world/theatre piece—better serves to characterize McCraney's work.

McCraney extends the possession of the *ase* tradition and its characteristic signifying with an acting style of stark juxtaposition. In "On Yoruba Culture," McCraney cites an example of Yoruba performance; in playing a soldier, the actor conveys strength and bravado—all the things, McCraney says, that we expect of a stereotype—but the actor can shift and mold this characterization suddenly to incorporate, for example, a surprising vulnerability. Importantly, in McCraney's demonstration, these shifts in characterization are abrupt, rather than subtle or gradual—nearly pantomime, in his brief explanation—which creates a clear and intentional juxtaposition of the moods. This performance does not reflect a shift to realism wherein the character breaks from stereotype to show hidden depths of emotion. Rather, the moods under possession clash and draw attention to the performance itself. McCraney explains the effect: "Those two things next to each other actually show you more about what being a soldier is, more about what humanity is, because it's not just this stuck form. It's a form that keeps changing, shaping, moving as the night goes on." Certainly, complex characterization is nothing new, but the stark contrasts and intentional theatricality of McCraney's work are distinctive. These characteristics emerge in the frequent use of ritualized movement, as we shall see in his use of invocations and dream sequences. His juxtaposition recalls Gotrick's discussion of Yoruba theatre as simultaneously presentational and representational.

Queer Dreams

The Yoruba cosmology and performance traditions discussed above become perfect media through which McCraney creates a queering performance. In the triptych, McCraney of course positions queerness as an identity deserving of representation and respect, but as I show,

he further extends queerness to a symbolic mode of access. When embodied onstage, I find that McCraney's multivalent queering performance bears significant similarities to Colbert's black movements because it offers new temporalities and opportunities for communal healing. Thus, while Colbert's application of her term centers on intersections of race and gender, I argue that scholars and practitioners can productively extend her parameters by including black queer sexualities as modes of black movements. McCraney presents the oppressive and/or uninspiring status quo through the relatively realistic daily conversations held between the characters, but he juxtaposes this reality against the radically imagined alternatives of his dream sequences. Dreams mark the triptych throughout and take many forms. At times, they are visions shared between the audience and characters that function as ritual invocations, and at other times, they are an individual's vision, which the audience experiences either as acted-out scenes, or as stories recalled for other characters' interpretation. The amorphousness of the dreams themselves is echoed in the dreaming characters' understanding of their sexuality. These characters are not invested in defining themselves as "out" or "closeted"—a nomenclature largely drawn from whiteness.[7] Instead, these characters seem fundamentally uninterested in labels and do not hide the breadth of their sexuality. (Marcus is a bit of an exception here, as he does not yet understand his sexuality.) Simply put, they seem to lack any investment in the labels of these identity categories, even though the culture surrounding them buzzes with rumors and is eager to apply the labels they shrug off. In all these iterations, queerness functions as an access point; because

[7] The whiteness inherent in terms like "closeted" can be expanded further to strict labels of sexuality more broadly. For instance, some men of color "'[d]o not identify as gay,' because 'gay' is always already a term of whiteness, the West, or contemporary capitalism" (Boellstorff 295). A common phrase some may suggest for McCraney's characters that aligns with black masculinity may be "down-low"—indicating a man who has sex with other men privately, but publicly maintains the appearance of strict heterosexuality. Shua, a brief love interest of Marcus, plays with this term when speaking of himself: "Enter Shua with his Kangol / Low . . . Down low" (320). Even so, the term does not quite suit others, as Marcus and Elegba do not exactly hide or deign to define their sexualities for their communities.

the dreamers are not performing their sexuality "correctly," or according to the homophobic dictates of a culture that rewards heterosexual coupling, they exist in a liminal space—a space difficult to label and therefore to fully condemn or understand for the more conventional around them.

At the same time, McCraney layers this representational liminality with a presentational, symbolic degree of liminality: several characters have "the secret of sweet." This title is specifically applied to Marcus, whose coming to sexuality shapes the play *Marcus.* The term, "sweet," is a predominantly southern label describing a man who is perceived to be gay, or who does not perform his masculinity or heterosexuality as stereotypically as expected. As with all such labels, it can also be embraced as an identity category. The secret in question is not Marcus's sexuality, which the great majority of characters apply to Marcus with certainty—although Marcus himself avoids the labels completely. Rather, the secret is Marcus's ability as a seer. McCraney frames Marcus's sexuality and ability as a potentially oppositional duality, saying, "*Marcus* is a play that says, 'Well, I may be gay, but I also see dreams that tell the future.' How magical is that? You can be more than just one thing. You can be a pillar in your community but also be something they disdain" (qtd. in Brodersen 19). In a choice perhaps reflecting the discrimination and confusion he experienced in his own childhood, McCraney foregrounds the sociopolitical impact of Marcus's assumed identity. In the world of the play, however, McCraney reproduces some elements of discrimination, but by and large positions Marcus's queerness and sight as liberating forces that gradually gain the respect of his community. Ultimately, contrary to McCraney's offhand wording above, the play encourages the audience to see Marcus's sexuality and his ability as linked. Aunt Elegua—an eccentric, but a woman often sought out for her interpretive abilities—says, "Say sweet boys got a secret of

sight" (294). This equation or causality deserves a word of caution; just as the Magical Negro trope exoticizes and marginalizes black characters in American films, a magical gay character might be similarly appropriated and misused. In McCraney's hands, however, this story remains Marcus's, and his sexuality and gifts are explored with complexity. Marcus's sight gives him access to a spiritual plane in his dreams; this access allows him to learn the whereabouts of members of his community who have long since disappeared—a skill perfectly in keeping with black movements via disrupting space and place and enabling healing.

While the connection between queerness and sight is only specifically attributed to Marcus, a closer examination of the triptych reveals that several central characters experience queerness as a liberating liminality, experienced through the dream sequences. Both *Brothers Size* and *Red and Brown Water* begin with the ritual of invocations. These openings could be classed apart from dreams, but I unite them here because they function the same in performance. These invocations call the orisha-named characters into being on the stage, and they should end, McCraney writes, with the "cast glow[ing] like a pantheon of deities" (11). I find that the invocations function as Colbert's black movements in the ways they shift temporalities through embodied action onstage. *Brothers Size*, in keeping with McCraney's interest in drum-like rhythms, opens with Elegba and brothers Ogun and Oshoosi repeating words or short phrases in their turn:

> Elegba: The road is rough
>
> Oshoosi: Mmmm…
>
> Ogun: Huh! (137-38)

This sequence is repeated and then revised, and McCraney advises that the invocation "should be repeated for as long as needed to complete the ritual" (137). McCraney does not specify the end

he has in mind, but as Jones outlines, the expected end is to conjure the orisha, "invit[ing] them to the earth plane as a sign of their blessing and support" (Jones 324). The rhythm created through the cycles of these staccato words and phrases recalls the percussion common to Yoruba diasporic performance, evoking a diasporic connection between then and now, here and there. The drums further cement the connection through their allusion to Ogun's status as orisha of war. As Colbert's discussion of black movements illustrates, McCraney's work disrupts the temporalities of the reality outside the theatre, opening up a liminal space of alternative possibilities via performance. McCraney alludes to this liminality in his setting for the works, the "distant present." The invocation opens an alternative reality—a parallel timeline, perhaps—in which possibilities are not predetermined by statistical realities or dramatic conventions.

Before discussing McCraney's use of these wide possibilities, it's important to note that, among the methods of invocation in his work, the space of potentiality evoked by the drum-like rhythms of *Brothers Size* is evinced differently in *Red and Brown Water*. The latter's opening invocation instead signals a break from serial time and the physics of space as they are expected to operate in reality or realism. McCraney's use of ambiguous narrative time is established in the prologue, and will remain unclear throughout, even though the action of the story is simple to follow. The key plot points of the play are as follows: Oya, because she has missed her opportunity to go to college on a running scholarship because of her mother's illness and death, and because she cannot become pregnant and secure the lasting love of Shango, ultimately offers Shango another piece of herself as tribute: her ear. She collapses after this offering, and the audience is told in the epilogue that Shango "left her there bleeding" (127). The invocation that opens the play, however, takes place in a time after these events have occurred. Oya has already transitioned into a liminal space. In the invocation, the cast stands downstage in a line, and as

they speak their lines, they gradually move upstage. Oya, by contrast, remains left center stage alone, and McCraney specifies her stillness: "She lies down on the ground, holds her head / And stares up to the sky. Her lines are said from this position like a chant or moan" (11). In the Public Theatre's 2009 production, they amended these directions and instead had their Oya simulate levitation atop a metal tub, waving her limbs in the air (Colbert 265). Her lines throughout the prologue are variations on her ethereal state, saying "Oya in the air Oya…" and "A breeze over Oya" (12). The emphasis on Oya's simultaneous stillness and ethereality carries multiple implications. As in *Brothers Size*, it draws attention to her status as orisha of wind and storms, evoking the diasporic connection discussed earlier. Oya stays apart from the cast, they speak about her:

> Aunt Elegua: I don't know all . . .
>
> Mama Moja: Nobody does.
>
> Aunt Elegua: But say she ain't even scream. (12)

The characters speak of her as if she is absent, and many readers assume Oya is dead. This is a valid interpretation, although descriptions of her might just as easily suggest institutionalization or simply a deep dive within herself in which she has become unresponsive to outsiders. Even if audiences accept Oya as dead, the understanding of death must be divorced from notions of permanence and serial time. Oya exists outside of serial time, perhaps by virtue of her ghostly status, and certainly by virtue of her status as orisha. In keeping with a persistent characteristic of McCraney's work, Oya, too, might be considered a liminal figure in this opening scene. She appears onstage with, yet apart from, a chorus of women. The actor playing Oya speaks lines that do not overlap with those of the chorus of women, so they share the space, seemingly recognizing her presence. However, while the chorus of women are caught up in their worldly

lamentation of Oya's strangeness and suffering, Oya's lines—in concert with her physical separation from the chorus onstage—maintain her apartness. She revels in her ethereality—she is "in the air"—and is no longer affected by the events the chorus relates. In one of the most clearly feminist statements of the triptych, Oya's ethereality, her ghostly presence, at once reveals the great wrongs done her as a member of a society in which fertility is valued above all else, and it reveals her status as orisha—the story therefore serving as an origin tale—and providing her an entirely different access to time, power, and autonomy than she had access to as a human. The latter, then, exemplifies McCraney's radical imagination, or what Colbert calls the "ritualized rupture" of the play. She concludes that Oya's act of floating, an act which begins and ends the work, "fill[s] black freedom practices with ancient and yet unborn power" (267).

Colbert's reading of *In the Red and Brown Water*, then, aligns her theory of black movements as freedom practices operating against racism and misogyny. These disrupted temporalities that offer liberatory futures, however, gain further applicability and promise through the queerness of McCraney's dreamers. While the opening invocations are shared among the characters and audiences alike, the majority of dreams in the triptych are the visions of particular dreamers blessed with the secret of sweet. McCraney embodies intersectionality in his weaving of Oya's feminist black movements with Elegba's secret of sweet. Elegba, still a child at this point in the triptych, is a friend to Oya and—in keeping with his trickster orisha identity—a constant source of amusement and mischief. In Yoruba cosmology, Elegba is also the messenger of the gods. When he has a dream about Oya that disturbs him, he seeks out Mama Moja—Oya's mother, and a woman renowned for "know[ing] dreams" (21). Elegba's dream is set in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and he first recounts the bone people he encounters on the bottom. He asks them why they choose not to return home, and they answer, "When we walk

there, it / Wasn't there no more" (23). Elegba refers to those Africans captured who died during the Atlantic passage, and also to the enslaved who died in bondage. These spirits must wander, a fact that—like Oya's similar liminality—reveals the horrors of their abuse as human beings. However, by invoking them at the opening of the dream, McCraney also positions these spirits as deities through which Elegba—in his embodied human role within the narrative, and in the actor's embodiment of him onstage—can access the ruptured temporalities opened through black movements, thereby enabling him to see the future. When Oya enters the dream, Elegba sees her floating in the water, turning it red by the blood flowing from between her legs. (Her brown skin in the red water drives the title of Oya's tale.) Oya's menstrual blood symbolizes at once fertility and failed fertility. This blood marks her as a woman of childbearing age, but its presence also confirms that she has been unable to follow through on its promise—so highly valued and expected within her community. The dream predicts her inability to conceive later in the play, and thus the decision to bleed and produce flesh of her flesh differently through severing and offering her ear.

Importantly, McCraney fuses Elegba's identities as seer and "sweet" in the context of this dream, positioning Elegba's seer abilities as tied inextricably to his sexuality. Although it is not clearly confirmed in the text, Elegba's youth and his inability to interpret this dream suggest that he is just coming to his sight, and he is simultaneously coming to his sexuality. He tells Mama Moja the end of his dream: "A wave, that red and brown water, wash on me / And I wake up sweating on my face and wet / Low down, like that water, between my legs, wet" (24). This first wet dream is brought on by his vision of Oya, and his queerness will emerge as pansexual later in the triptych, when he as an adult seeks sexual relationships without respect to gender. I find that McCraney strategically aligns Oya and Elegba; Elegba's refusal to perform heterosexuality

aligns with Oya's inability to conceive a child—a "failure" that leads members of her community to ostracize her as somehow less than a woman, complicating simple binaries of gender. McCraney's understanding of the intersections between homophobia and misogyny creates a unique connection between these two characters, Oya and Elegba, positing a future of greater intersectional black freedom practices. Despite the larger community's point of view, the play positions both of their sexualities as natural and even gifted, as seen in the freedom Oya achieves in merging with the air, and the sight Elegba is just discovering.

The promise of greater freedom practices begun through Elegba's sight and its connections to Oya gains traction in the next generation in the triptych. Marcus Eshu of *Marcus* is Elegba's son. Marcus occupies a similar position to his father in *Red and Brown Water*; he, too, is just coming to understand both his sexuality and his gift. Initially, Marcus is not yet ready to embrace a queer identity, but all around him his friends are quick to label him as sweet and keep trying to get him to admit it. His dreams also confuse him, and like his father before him, he seeks out a woman who understands dreams: Aunt Elegua. His dream, which opens the play, features Oshoosi Size, brother to Ogun, whose story is told in *Brothers Size*: "Oshoosi Size standing in a pool of water crying gently at first until he covers his mouth, doubles over" (247). When Marcus tells Elegua, he does not yet know of whom he dreams: "There is this man. He always in the rain . . . And he saying things to / Me. Light at first / Then so hard I can barely hear. Hard rain" (273). Elegua correctly interprets the dream as portending a terrible hurricane, and it is she that connects Marcus's sight to his sexuality: "Say sweet boys got a secret of sight" (294). Because the play rejects clear notions of serial time and history, Marcus's dream predicts a hurricane of a similar force to Katrina, but it would be inaccurate to completely equate the two. It is not until Marcus sees Ogun double over after a funeral that he begins to understand who the

man in his dreams is. At the conclusion of *Brothers Size*, Ogun in a grand show of brotherly love encourages Oshoosi to run from the police. Oshoosi's escape means that Ogun never sees him again, and by the time of *Marcus*, an indeterminate but significant amount of time has passed, and Ogun suffers greatly not knowing the fate of his brother.

Part of the cause of Ogun's suffering is that, although the brothers ultimately parted on good terms, their relationship was marred early on through Ogun's jealousy and internalized homophobia. Although throughout *Brothers Size* Oshoosi insistently and forcefully proclaims his desire to have sex with women, his time in prison with Elegba brought the two very close. They developed an intense intimacy that included a sexual component. Ogun sees this intimacy as a form of betrayal, and his discomfort with the relationship's physicality reveals not overt and virulent homophobia, but certainly a degree of internalized homophobia. This background is necessary in order to further demonstrate the transformative powers of the secret of sweet. While in Elegba's dreams of Oya, McCraney creates an alternative temporality in which misogyny and homophobia can be better battled through shared coalition, Marcus's queer sight is shown to have the power to help Ogun grow and release his internalized prejudices. Marcus shares his dream with Ogun, and Ogun concludes, "It means my brother's dead. / You dream like your daddy" (360). In an unaffected, touching moment of symbolism, Ogun finds in Marcus a degree of intimacy not unlike the intimacy shared by their respective family members, Oshoosi and Elegba. Ogun shares some of his regrets about his resentment towards Oshoosi, specifically his jealousy of Elegba and his lack of understanding of their relationship. He and Marcus share tears and then kiss or almost kiss—a tenderness that reads as healing (305). The moment may or may not be played as a show of sexual desire; by this point, McCraney's queered lens has made such distinction immaterial. Through the careful avoiding of distinct identity labels, and the queer

liminality of the performance via dreams and possession, McCraney positions the secret of sweet as a means to effect and imagine a more just future. These characters' intimate moment signals the resolution of this prior conflict and gestures to a broader promise: a vision of a future in which a freer version of the self—one as divorced from or attached to identity labels as they choose—can move through the world without repercussions.

Conclusions and a Coda: Limitations Placed on African Diasporic Performance

For the sake of clarity and to foreground McCraney's particular interventions, I have up to now maintained and extended the terminology that has been prevalent in discussions of his work: African diasporic performance and black movements. These terms have allowed me to focus on my own two-pronged thesis: I have extended Colbert's initial definition of black movements to incorporate McCraney's queering lens, which opens a space of liminality in which he, through the embodied movements onstage, can help his audience imagine a more just future across sexuality, gender, and race. The triptych demonstrates the secret of sweet as a cosmic, queering force that can disrupt homophobia and invite affinity across intersecting oppressions. This force is indebted to Yoruba cosmology and performance traditions, which he intentionally fuses over the course of the triptych. In interviews, McCraney reveals his intent as an even broader statement about the role of diaspora in nation and Americanness. His use of Yoruba cosmology and performance traditions does not so much queer the ideas of nation and Americanness as it reveals these concepts to be always already queer, liminal, and diasporic. As the scholarly conversation surrounding McCraney's work develops, McCraney's experimental form and content will doubtless continue to shape discussions of black movements and the liberatory potential gained in being part of African diasporic performance.

As I noted earlier, however, the majority of the black women playwrights in the remainder of my study have found less certain places in Harrison's determined boundaries of African diasporic performance. Harrison terms his point of contrast to African diasporic performance "American dramas of the black experience" (136). He claims that such writers (and he specifically mentions Lynn Nottage here) are post-racial, and he interprets this term to mean that such writers refuse to center blackness and ignore the performance traditions that emerge from African diasporic influences, and in some cases, allow their work to be sanitized or corrupted through its production in white-run institutions. He claims, "Rather than pursuing or at least inspecting the layers of symbolic references retained in the metalanguage of the African Diaspora [. . .] most expressive output of new black work developed at white institutions is usually subordinated by the popular receptivity of the content and systems of critical logic codified by the aesthetics of the dominant culture" (131). It is clear that Harrison largely rejects realism, journalistic theatre, the family drama, and many other theatrical forms prominent in the white and male dominated realms of Broadway and many other commercial theatre spaces. While these critiques have some merit, and while the ongoing dominance of white institutions limits access and aesthetic and cultural breadth in many cases, the remaining artists of my study do, I argue, offer innovations and references that rep and rev on African diasporic performance. By failing to recognize the African diasporic innovations of these artists, the scholarly community falls into the trap of eurocentrism it rails against. What is more, Harrison's own application of African diasporic performance—even in the case of McCraney—reads only its sociopolitical impact in terms of its celebration of blackness. As I have shown, McCraney's work is far more intersectional than Harrison's praise might lead scholar-practitioners to believe. In fusing transnational feminist theory with my expanded definition of African diasporic

performance, the true sociopolitical and activist potential of these works becomes clearer. The remainder of this project will seek, among other intents, to combat the reductive parameters put forth by Harrison, and to call for greater scholarly focus and interpretation of these works. Only in growing the scholarly conversation surrounding these artists can scholars and practitioners fully recognize their contributions to transnational feminism and theatrical innovation.

Chapter Two:

Realism, Activism, and Affect: Reimagining African Women at War

This chapter explores a recognizable characteristic of the plays of my study: the reimagining of Africa. As in McCraney's plays of Chapter One, later chapters examine American playwrights' evocation of the African diaspora and ancestry. This chapter, by contrast, features playwrights who reimagine moments of recent African history in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia. Harry J. Elam and Douglas A. Jones might group the playwrights of this chapter, Lynn Nottage and Danai Gurira, into a new wave of twenty-first century playwrights in the United States that they characterize as "post-black." They define this group of playwrights in part by the fact that, while earlier periods of United States authored plays often tend to romanticize Africa, post-black playwrights typically avoid such depictions. Rather, as Elam and Jones observe, "They favor, instead, a far grittier look at how the realities of AIDS, ethnic genocide, government corruption, devastating poverty, and global indifference continue to link black diasporic communities" (xxxi). While I will not further Elam and Jones's term, the weighty subject matter of the plays of this chapter lend credence to their observations. Contemporary black dramatists writing for American audiences have taken particular interest in creating activist theatre that examines African women's wartime experiences. Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2008) and Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* (2009) employ transnational feminisms in an effort to educate and elicit activist engagement from their primarily western audiences. They employ largely realistic means of representation, seeking affective engagement from their audiences. In this piece, I examine these works and their investigation of women's experiences during armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia. Adopting feminist affect theory and its intersections with cognitive theory—particularly explorations of the limitations and

potentialities of empathy—I argue that this work makes important strides in theatrical representation that seeks to transform empathic engagement; it begins to make the audience "responsible to" rather than "responsible for" the depicted women and—more importantly—the African women by whom Nottage and Gurira were inspired (Pedwell 174). One such theorist, Carolyn Pedwell, argues that this shift in responsibility marks a necessary precursor to empathic engagement that undermines what she calls the "neoliberal compassion economy" (176). This examination will question the broad suspicion that continues to mark dramatic realism as a socially- or politically-conscious form of theatre. At the same time, it will also present opportunities to interrogate western depictions of African women and the visions of transnational solidarity that emerge from them.

This new wave of black playwrights has been transparent in their motivations and intentions in depicting women from African countries on western stages. The authors frequently express an understanding of global community that supersedes their national identifications. My next chapter explores these authors' use of the Middle Passage and the resultant African diaspora as a mode of identification that supplants the national; by contrast, the plays of focus in this chapter evince a transnational connection centered on the material realities of global commercial markets and international efforts to regulate those markets. The widespread erasure effected by this global market's push and pull and its political consequences have become a motivator for playwright activism. Lynn Nottage's inspiration for *Ruined* is a case in point:

> There is a Yoruba saying: "The same white man who made the pencil made the eraser." I find that so many people from the African Diaspora find themselves marginalized by history. Completely erased from history. And part of my mission as a writer is to sort of resurrect some of these figures . . . I like to think of it as

> "world culture," because American is no longer Western culture. It reflects people from around the world. (Qtd. in Fox 5)

Nottage's words demonstrate her identification with a global network of the African diaspora—a mode of identification that does not eliminate her understanding of herself as an American, but that rejects any monolithic understanding of the United States in favor of its true ethnic and cultural diversity—a diversity that begins, in this new global landscape, to challenge the relevance of national boundaries.[8] For Danai Gurira, a transnational identification is the natural result of her experience; she has identified as "Zamerican" because she was born in the United States, but lived in Zimbabwe from ages five to nineteen (Gurira and Salter, "*Theater Talk*"). These playwrights' understanding of themselves and their work as transnational grounds itself in a cultural experience that transcends national borders.

As discussed in the introduction to this study, the distinction between transnational and international rests upon this notion of transcendence. While "international" suggests pathways by which to travel between fixed, discrete nations, "transnational" responds to these limitations by homing in on a sense of interconnectedness and fluidity the former term fails to capture. As Constance Devereaux and Martin Griffin colorfully put it in their 2013 *Narrative, Identity, and the Map of Cultural Policy Once Upon a Time in a Globalized World*, "It seems inarguable that when a speaker invokes the *transnational*, he is conjuring up at the same time a narrative of interaction and communication, something that makes the nation-state appear as outdated as a

[8] Nottage's advocacy for "world culture" demands some critique. It is possible to interpret her call as an attempt to position American culture as the norm, a position that would function to further erase and ignore the multiplicity suggested by "world culture." Nottage's positionality as outsider-researcher in creating *Ruined* does not necessarily force her into the role of cultural tourist, but the resonances and dangers of her means of bringing this play to fruition must not be ignored. To prevent slippages that perpetuate western supremacy, Nottage's classification of American culture as "world culture" must be understood not as an attempt to overlay world culture with Americanness, but rather via her attempts to demonstrate American neoimperialism that helped to create the violence in which the women of Congo found and find themselves.

Victorian factory populated by a workforce chained to a clanking industrial production line" (19 emphasis original). The hyperbole of Devereaux and Griffin's words reveals their caution at the frequent idealism inherent in many scholars' use of the term. Nonetheless, I find transnational particularly applicable to the playwrights of this study. Their works do indeed "conjure"—a term particularly suited to the stage—a vision of interconnectedness by calling on the African diaspora. But what is more, they do not do so in a way that remains willfully ignorant of the material realities wrought by the fixity of national borders and powerful nations' and corporations' means under globalization of effectively ignoring those borders for financial gain. In fact, Nottage and Gurira make central their exposure of this exploitation.

The playwrights' own transnational identifications have prompted them to turn their attention to African women in warzones. Both Nottage and Gurira center their works on women's created communities, and their depictions of women are primarily realistic, inviting audience's emotional engagement. Gurira's motivation stems from the crisis of representation—of erasure. In explaining her title, *Eclipsed*, she argues, "We always hear about the men who are perpetuating the war, the ones who come in and stop the war. But we never hear about the women who are at the mercy of a war. It's about that light that gets obscured. The title, it's about the eclipsing—the obscuring and blocking of those who have power and potential and who've been robbed of their own self-determination" (qtd. in Ruiz). Gurira's reference to "the men who are perpetuating the war" must be understood within the transnational frame of the crisis; not only does this category incorporate the soldiers on the ground and the government and rebel officials guiding them, but also the broader network of humans involved in global capital who create and feed such conflicts. Ultimately, her means of representation and the emotional engagement it demands are calls for action. Nottage is plainspoken about the intent guiding her

depictions of Congolese women in war. Nottage states, "I believe in engaging people emotionally, because I think they react more out of emotion" (qtd. in McGee, AR4). Both authors, then, seek artistic forms that will prompt reactions, or activist engagement. By extending traditional feminist critiques of dramatic structure with the contribution of affect theory, the potentialities of the forms these authors have chosen will become clear.

On the Affordances and Limitations of Empathy

The turn to affect and its intersections with cognitive science provide an opportunity to investigate the politically-engaged works of this chapter. Among the strategies available, I argue that evoking empathy is the paramount concern of these contemporary black playwrights. The employment of empathy, however, remains fraught, particularly in the context of transnational literature in the time of globalization. Drawing on Carolyn Pedwell, Rhonda Blair, Nicola Shaughnessy, Amy Cook, and other affect and cognitive science theorists, I develop the groundwork to explore the complicated function of empathy in the imagined Africa of Nottage's and Gurira's plays.

Transnational feminisms have long grappled with the affordances and challenges of empathy. In activist literature and in larger political debates, these feminist and anti-racist scholars often envision empathic engagement as aligned with social justice. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty argue that transnational feminism must make "an ethical commitment to work to transform terror into engagement based on empathy [. . . in order to build] solidarity across otherwise debilitating social, economic and psychic boundaries" (xlii). Breda Gray has revisited these themes more recently, arguing that empathy "can bring emotion, ethics and politics together to facilitate contextually-sensitive, contingent and, hopefully, politically effective feminist solidarities" (qtd. in Pedwell, *Affective,* 44). Carolyn Pedwell's 2014 book

Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy echoes these scholars' belief in the role of empathy in forging transnational coalitions.

Nonetheless, transnational feminists are quick to temper the promise of empathy with the obtuseness and abuse that often accompany it. For Pedwell, the neoliberal "compassion economy" forms the central challenge to the potentialities of empathy. As evidenced in elements of Barack Obama's foreign and economic policies and the mission statements from heads of global corporations, the promise of empathy has entered global economic discourse. While the intent prompting such uses may be admirable, transnational feminists remain wary of its capacity for appropriation. Pedwell draws on Aihwa Ong's discourse on neoliberalism to explain the dangers of that appropriation; in neoliberalist governments and private sectors, Ong argues that this deployment of empathy involves "the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics" (qtd. in Pedwell 30). Per Ong, neoliberalism functions as a form of Foucauldian control, centering on "the capacity and potential of individuals and the populations as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes" (qtd. in Pedwell 30). Pedwell expands Ong's point of focus to the stage of globalization and "its neoimperial underpinnings," arguing that "empathy can be made to work as a powerful mode of biopolitical governmentality" (30). The risk is that empathy functions less as "an affective tool in service of social justice and more as a *technology of access*, providing an 'insider perspective' on 'the truth'" (172). Herein lies the central warning to take away from Pedwell's study: empathy as tool or "technology of access" must be met with a high degree of skepticism.

Advances in cognitive science are useful in distinguishing empathy as a "technology of access" from definitions of empathy in keeping with transnational feminist goals. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's distinction between emotions, feelings, and behaviors provides insight into

the nature of empathy. Rhonda Blair helpfully summarizes Damasio's distinction—called the somatic marker hypothesis—as follows:

> [T]he brain creates strings of associations arising in the body first as an emotion (a term used by Damasio and other neuroscientists to describe a physiological state of the body), which is translated into a feeling (a 'registration' of an emotional state), which then leads to behavior, which is a response to all of the preceding that may or may not be associated with reason or rational thought [. . .] Damasio uses the term 'somatic marker' to describe how body-states become linked with our conscious responses to or interpretations of them. (Blair 22)

Damasio's distinction between emotions as physiological states and feelings as the recognition and naming of those states draws attention to the importance of context and prior experience in the feeling of empathy. Given the significance of context and experience, cognitive science seems to suggest that empathy is most likely to prompt positive, interventionist behavior only when the observer understands their separateness from the observed.

The discovery of mirror neurons carries implications in assessing human behavior and empathy. While motor neurons fire when we ourselves perform an action, mirror neurons—a subset of motor neurons—fire when we watch someone else perform the very same action. Neuroscientists' observation of mirror neurons indicates that our brains automatically adopt the point of view of other human beings. However, it is important not to conflate the experience of an adopted point of view with the point of view of the person completing the action. As Amy Cook explains in her exploration of empathy in the theatre, "Although studies have revealed partial overlap in cell excitation in seeing pain and experiencing pain, there is not a complete mirroring and an appraisal of the context ('my thumb is not actually in danger') quickly inhibits

further cell firing" (79). The mirror, then, does not erase the separation between the self and the observed. This separation is vital because "if it hurts to be aware of it, we turn away from the aversive stimulus, conflating the stimulus hurting them with the stimulus hurting us. [. . .] If you are really in pain, you do not want me to feel your pain. You want me to feel my own power to stop your pain" (Cook 79-80). An initial requirement, then, in empathic engagement in activist theatre is the need to avoid complete audience absorption in the staged action.

In practice, our interpretations of empathy can fail to maintain the separateness that helps empathy to prompt positive engagement. Although cognitive science presents evidence that separation exists on the neural level, Damasio's discussion of the import of context and personal experience in recognizing and interpreting emotions presents another wrinkle: we may misinterpret and inflate our centrality as observers. The often fraught outcomes of empathic engagement in the neoliberal, global marketplace are manifest in Pedwell's study of immersion literature. In her 2012 article, "Affective (Self-) Transformations: Empathy, Neoliberalism and International Development," Pedwell examines the professional development and training literatures emerging from immersion programs undertaken by western development agencies and aid organizations. These immersion programs aimed to provide professionals with first-hand experience of the daily lives of the impoverished communities whom the development programs sought to help. The literature that these professionals wrote upon their return may deserve the recognition of its good intentions; nonetheless, Pedwell argues that it reveals degrees of erasure and appropriation that are of interest for any socially- and politically-motivated use of affect. Pedwell finds this engagement encounters problems when the observer can presume to "co-feel"—to equally share the experience of the family with whom they are temporarily living (167). By appropriating the host family's experiences and the emotions they prompt, observers

can reach troubling conclusions about their grasp of the host family's material realities: "*emotion itself is understood as truth*, unshaped by cognitive, cultural or political frames and, as such, 'imagination' and 'experience' become oddly counter-posed, rather than viewed as imbricated" (171). By failing to recognize the extent to which their own imaginations color their conclusions, these observers participate in the erasure of those whom they most seek to understand. In the end, the literature they produce can become "discourses of authority" that replace or appropriate these voices (172). In the context of drama and performance, then, the separation between observer and staged action is necessary both to prompt activist engagement and to prevent erasures of the events being staged.

Given the nuanced interpretations of cognitive science beginning to unpack the nature of empathy, transnational feminist and anti-racist scholars continue to seek out positive affordances of empathy. Two forms of empathy central to this study—imaginative and confrontational—begin to defeat the use of empathy as a technology of access through the use of context that prompts metacognition and self-reflection. The role of imaginative empathy emerges in the analysis of storytelling and is therefore central to theatre. Imagination and representation in the context of a story offers hope through its position as fiction. Pedwell argues that storytelling "can imagine affective relationships that move beyond what 'we' already think we know is true or inevitable" (34).[9] This space provides room to operate against the "felt truths" conveyed through the limited lens of media coverage of other countries' people and interests and the biased on-the-ground reports that result from immersion programs. Additionally, this space challenges the numbness that the repetitive coverage of distant traumas and abuses can evoke. Pedwell places the promise of this space primarily on the role of imagination, saying, "imagination is necessary

[9] Pedwell's claims here resonate strongly with the theoretical focus of the next two chapters, Soyica Diggs Colbert's concept of "black movements."

to interrupt assumptions of commensurability, transparency and 'felt truth' that characterise development discourse in the neoliberal compassion economy" ("Affective," 176).

Storytelling and the imaginative empathy it evokes, then, are a first step toward inviting empathic engagement in activist theatre; however, imaginative empathy does not sufficiently challenge audiences to function without its counterpart: confrontational empathy. Pedwell is quick to note that imaginative empathy, when left alone, can become a means of appeasing western desires to rest comfortably in their capacity for good will. Confrontational empathy, then, must remain in the fore of transnational literatures of empathic engagement. Feminist and anti-racist literatures on empathy insist "acknowledgement of *complicity* is essential to any form of empathic engagement with the potential to play a role in radically disrupting existing power relations" ("Affective," 173). Such calls are not new to transnational feminisms; western white feminism has long been criticized for engaging in transnational causes that function more to silence nonwestern women. Ultimately, the nonwestern women whom such causes ostensibly seek to help become tools through which western white women can position themselves as more free. In confrontational empathy, Pedwell finds that the emphasis must be inverted—that audiences must be made to feel "'responsible to' rather than 'responsible for'" the depicted ("Affective," 174). These two categories of empathy—imaginative and confrontational empathy—are engaged in the reimagined Africa of Nottage's and Gurira's work.

Theory and Theatre: Affect and Cognitive Science on Stage

Nottage's and Gurira's use of emotional engagement and realistic theatrical forms—especially in commercial theatre settings—remain subject to doubt as activist theatre forms. However, feminist theorists' positions on the affordances of realism have begun to shift. In "Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein" (2008), Jill

Dolan cautiously embraces the successes of liberal feminism's use of realism, as well as the third-wave call to work within the bounds of capitalism, "instead of holding onto what might finally be an idealist belief that feminist practice can remain outside capitalism's reach" (434-35). She argues that feminists today can't split hairs of "the feminisms" because the movement itself is endangered by the larger climate of "ideological conservatism" and postfeminist claims that feminism is "done" (435). In the United States, the concerns Dolan voiced in 2008 have been thrown into sharper relief in 2019, given the "America First" slogan of Donald Trump. Indeed, postfeminism may be moving from a condition to be observed to an actively embraced title, as evidenced in Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway's self-designation "postfeminist" in an interview with the *Washington Post* (Hein). Cautiously, then, I argue that scholarship must make further space to examine the contributions of theatre in commercial spaces—to examine its reach to broader audiences and its capacity to criticize the corrupting forces of global capital—while remaining ever-conscious of the extent to which the need for financial success in these spaces colors and confines the criticisms available to playwrights.

In this reconsideration of commercial theatre and its frequent reliance on realism, cognitive science provides insight into affect in drama and performance specifically. The potentiality of imaginative and confrontational empathy through storytelling is amplified in the context of live performance. Nicola Shaugnessy states the case well:

> In performance, however, the encounter is multi-sensual; bodily sensations can be transferred between stage and audience through the nose, skin and muscles as well as the eyes and ears. I suggest then, that contemporary performance, as a live and sensory medium is an appropriate form to embody affect. As such it can be used not only as a means of expression (or transaction) but also has the potential

> to transform experience through participatory processes in which memory can be remade, reconceptualized and rediscovered in different forms, whilst some aspects can be relinquished. (61)

Her reference to transformative experiences via participation carries special relevance for the Broadway run of *Eclipsed,* which requested specific and verbal audience participation. However, this transformation through the physical and emotional experience of spectatorship finds support in cognitive science's understanding of embodied knowledge—the connectedness of the brain and the body in cognition. In watching the action onstage—whether it is the natural movement of realism, or a stylized movement, or dancing—many cognitive science theorists have traced audience mirroring or reaction. Anna Fenemore positions audience members as "experiencers" and explains, "In *being motivated* 'experiencers' are able to experience some kind of associational or empathic kinaesthetic impulse or sensation. 'Experiencers', thus are 'being moved' (bodily) by performer and event such that they begin to experience kinaesthetic sensations normally attributed to their own intentional acts of moving, touching or seeing" (qtd in Shaugnessy 63). Whether audiences are asked to actively participate in the performance or if the actions onstage prompt subtler kinaesthetic sensations, Shaugnessy's and Fenemore's findings bear special weight for activist theatre. By exploring the ways the form and content of these works invite emotional engagement via imaginative and confrontational empathy, I find that these authors have importantly extended the promise of realism under transnational feminism. As the rest of the chapter will argue, subtle disruptions of otherwise realistic action in Nottage's and Gurira's plays seek to create transformative experiences via the embodied knowledges performed onstage.

***Ruined*: Investigation of Form**

While *Eclipsed* has not yet generated substantial scholarly response, Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* is beginning to receive the inquiry the play and its subject matter merit. Many of the arguments applied to Nottage's form are, at least in part, applicable to both works. The critical response to *Ruined* in particular has tended towards a focus on form due to Nottage's activist goals and her inspiration for *Ruined*. Nottage originally imagined the play as a retelling of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939). Although both plays feature formidable women doing the best they can to survive in a warzone, Brecht's form of epic theater encouraged the audience to maintain a critical distance from Mother Courage. Nottage, on the other hand, employs realism and in depth research for the opposite effect; she states, "I believe in engaging people emotionally, because I think they react more out of emotion" (qtd. in McGee, AR4). Thus, as *Ruined* director Kate Whoriskey explains, Brecht's play became a "false frame" because the desired audience reaction was radically different (xi). Nottage uses "emotion" in its popular sense, but it is clear that her understanding of emotion encompasses both the raw emotion and the feeling—per Damasio—that helps give a name to the raw emotion. Thus, she guides audience interpretation of these raw emotions through the context she presents, complementing audience members' own experiences and knowledge. Primarily, this conversation has emerged through lenses of trauma theory and postcolonial theories of neoliberal globalization, as well as the transnational feminist activist response to the effects of this process. Nottage's dramatic form commands much of this conversation, returning scholarly focus to the moments when the realism slips or shifts to a hybrid form.

The primary scholarly engagement with *Ruined* rests on its use of realism. The underlying assumption of critiques of realism is that because a writer presents a world that reflects reality, that world reiterates and validates the status quo. Jill Dolan's critique of the play

reflects this concern. Nottage ends the play with a romantic pairing of Mama Nadi and Christian—an ending that Dolan believes "capitulat[es] to realism's mandate that narratives resolve with heterosexual marriage that solves everything" (qtd. in Fox 11). Dolan's critique is justified; the play does miss an opportunity to center the women's relationships as a final image. The choice troubles the overall characterization of Mama Nadi and provides a neater, cleaner ending that seems uneasily tacked onto the work. Despite general scholarly agreement on this issue, Sharon Friedman, Barbara Ozieblo, Julia Moriarty, Ann Fox, and Jeff Paden have each found cause to argue that the play's realism—and the moments in which it slips realism's bounds—affords the work greater possibilities for activism than might be initially obvious. I draw on this important work in my discussion of *Ruined.* These scholars place Nottage's slippages within Brechtian technique, and they speak about emotion and audience response but, save Friedman, do not make direct use of affect theory to conceptualize Nottage's full contribution. In doing so, I argue that our scholarship can better codify and understand the effects of what these authors are creating for the stage. This more complete understanding provides a way forward for staged transnational feminism in the age of globalization, better preparing playwrights, scholars, and audiences alike to engage in the collective action these works ask us to take on.

Ruined: Imagination and Making Audiences Responsible *To*

Much of the existing critical conversation examines issues of representation, investigating what worlds the play imagines and the impact of that imagination. As such, the current conversation can be made to fit within the category of imaginative empathy. In imagining these women's world, Nottage sought a form of representation that would open her audience to an empathy she believes is not easily accessed. She explains that she needed to "peel back the

layers of emotion to reveal human truths that often get lost in clinical human rights reports and detached news stories" (qtd. in Katrak 34). Her initial goal, then, in representation became to make these women as emotionally complex and layered as possible—rather than numbers or brief headlines that are too overwhelming, distant, and therefore easily ignored to encourage action. Due to her realistic portrayals, then, Nottage concludes that audiences "feel as though they've spent two hours with a living, breathing human being with a story that can no longer be ignored" (qtd. in Ozieblo 76). In crafting these realistic depictions, Nottage remained aware that she needed to confront the challenge of representing the violence of war as it is enacted on women's bodies. She explains her strategy: "I didn't want to be sensationalistic. The audience had to be ready to hear the horrors, otherwise it would be too easy to dismiss them. I knew I had to seduce them first" (qtd. in Ozieblo 67). Her means of seduction and her careful staging of violence provide insight into how to create a space of imaginative empathy.

Nottage's work seduces her audience first by seeking to narrow the gulf separating the western audience member from Congolese woman at war. At its base, this effort is a simple call for the recognition of shared humanity. It would seem to be too obvious to warrant special attention, but, as Sharon Friedman explains, the perception of an unbridgeable difference cannot be underestimated: "characters who give a face to injustices and atrocities often unsettle deep-seated prejudices in audience members who interpret these horrors as byproducts of 'primitive' cultures, 'othered' in terms of race, class, religion, ethnicity, and status in the global hierarchy of power and privilege, rather than as the consequences of poverty and economic and political exploitation in a global marketplace" (595). Nottage confronts this presumption of vast difference immediately by, tellingly, inviting the western audience member to identify with the vanities and pleasures of consumerism. The audience meets Mama Nadi, the central character

and proprietor of the bar and brothel that forms the play's entire setting, as she inspects the latest delivery of goods that Christian has brought her. Among the necessary items for the establishment, Mama searches out something at once mundane and luxurious: red lipstick. She demands good-humoredly that Christian hand it over, and wastes no time at all: "*Mama grabs a sliver of a broken mirror from behind the rough-hewn bar, and gracefully applies the lipstick*" (7). Audience members share her pleasure in this moment, each knowing the excitement that accompanies the arrival of a long awaited trifle. Many audience members likely carry with them a tube or two of their own, and the action onstage forms a small continuity across the divide. Mama's further pleasure at receiving Belgian chocolates cements this continuity. In this moment, Nottage invites the audience to engage with imaginative empathy. It is only when Sophie and Salima—two women Mama considers hiring as sex workers—are discussed as just so many goods, that the audience must check their pleasure in this exchange. Nottage first, then, primes the audience to understand Congo as a part of the global marketplace to which they belong, and then to begin to question the ethics of this system. This quick shock to the audience's system provides a brief window into the confrontational empathy that will become more prominent as the piece continues.

The connection Nottage establishes on the grounds of shared humanity and membership in a global marketplace invites the audience to see this Congolese setting as plausible—as drawn from truth. The realism of Nottage's characterization, from the simple vanities and bickering of the characters to the detailed setting of the bar/brothel, to the knowledge that the play has emerged in response to actual events, leads audiences to believe that the events onstage—though clearly crafted into a narrative arc—are reasonably accurate approximations of Congolese women's experiences in the conflict itself. Herein lies the key danger of realism, and the reason

that the genre continues to prompt concern as an activist form. The women of Nottage's play are all survivors of sexual violence. The title itself refers to the damage done to several of the women's bodies through brutal sexual assault that leave the women unable to have vaginal sex or become pregnant. The sex work in which circumstances compel the women to engage, and the assault and sexual violence presented as a constant lurking threat have become, for these women, a new normal. In writing the work, then, Nottage had to confront a key question: how can a playwright represent sexual violence in a way that does not normalize or present it as inevitable? This concern is twofold. Certainly, it is necessary to take on the topic of sexual violence in a way that does not prompt perverse pleasure. In an entertainment industry that, to this day, often pairs sexual violence with intentionally eroticized framing, the perpetuation of rape culture through irresponsible representation remains a concern. Second, it is necessary to convince the audience that these horrors actually do happen to Congolese women while ensuring that this violence is not seen as inevitable—as beyond intervention. Especially for this latter imperative, a radically imaginative empathy is needed.

This careful balancing act of representation attracts the particular interest of scholars Sharon Friedman and Barbara Ozieblo. Both authors argue that Nottage modifies her realism with strategic slips into Brechtian distancing techniques in order to avoid exploiting sexual violence. The effect, Friedman concludes, is the evocation of a "'critical empathy' rather than voyeurism" (609). Because Friedman takes on a wide range of texts depicting women in war, she does not offer a close reading of the play to expand her understanding of this term; the phrase "critical empathy" implies a necessary degree of distance from the action as inevitable reality. As such, I read it as analogous with imaginative empathy—the term I adopt here. Friedman argues this distance is achieved through "ritualized gestures" of the brothel-turned-dancehall, which

disabuses audiences of "any idealized notions of romantic outposts and tender relations between soldiers and comfort women" (600). Ozieblo's reading of Nottage's Brechtian techniques is markedly similar. Ozieblo argues that she "distances the reality of violence by presenting a surreal and terrifyingly tense display of song and dance routines that puts us in mind of the upside down world of carnival" (75). I agree that the play presents the opportunity to realize these readings of the play, but caution that the extent to which the Brechtian influence is pronounced depends primarily on directorial choices of each production. Nottage herself does not make these emphases mandatory in the stage directions. That is to say, the music states messages outright, and careful attention to the lyrics draws the audience out of the story and to the larger point of the political realities it depicts. Nonetheless, Nottage herself notes that many audience members will not notice the message when it is set to a tune; Nottage explains that the lyrics enabled her to "interject a sense of irony" and "say more explicitly what I wanted" but, she notes, "people don't know this because it is camouflaged by music" (qtd. in Ozieblo 76). Thus, when Sophie sings, "As bullets fly like hell's rain, / Wild flowers wild and forest decays. / But here we're pouring Champagne" (Nottage 63), the deliberately upbeat music creates the cognitive dissonance Nottage seeks and reveals the razor's edge on which the women's physical safety rests. However, the psychic toll of this living arrangement emerges in a key scene that takes place in the brothel one evening; Act Two opens with Sophie and Mama singing an upbeat song while soldiers drink around them—a typical scene. However, when Josephine begins to dance, her typical seductive slow dance grows "increasingly frenzied" as she "releases her anger, her pain . . . everything" (64). The stage directions call for Josephine to "desperately grab[] at the air as if trying to hold onto something" (64). Josephine's dance serves as a Brechtian break; this

pairing of dance with Sophie's singing helps draw the audience's attention to the songs and to the clear message that breaks their absorption in the action.

I argue the strongest evocation of imaginative empathy occurs during the dramatic climax of the play: Salima's self-induced abortion and suicide. This scene, sometimes characterized as the sensation scene of a melodrama, has prompted multiple interpretations. Ozieblo contends that, while Mama Nadi and Sophie construct new identities that enable them to survive the trauma of the sexual violence acted upon them, Salima "accepts the blame that those she loved burden her with and, unable to reconstruct a satisfactory life, kills herself" (70). This reading places Salima's act within the bounds of psychological realism. On the contrary, I read the scene as an effort to distance the audience from realism and create an act that makes space for imaginative empathy. Salima's suicide is a protest, and its staging, as well as its effect on the rest of the action, radically reimagines the women's reality. Salima emerges onstage just as Commander Osembenga has ordered the torture, rape, and murder of the women of Mama Nadi's for their lack of loyalty: "*Salima slowly enters as if in a trance. A pool of blood forms in the middle of her dress, blood drips down her legs*" (94). Salima's trance-like state as she hovers on the edge of death imbues her entrance with the symbolic resonance of a ghostly presence. Her final line, delivered after she "*smiles triumphantly* [and] *takes Fortune's hand*" is "You will not fight your battles on my body anymore" (94). This line distances the audience from the action because viewers are conscious of its message. Indeed, this very effect prompted criticism from New York *Times* reviewer Ben Brantley, who said, "Ms. Nottage should be above sloganeering lines" (C1). His frustration likely stems from the fact that the line breaks any absorption in the scene, drawing the audience's attention instead to the symbolic relevance of Salima's act, rather than allowing the audience to feel her horror as their own. Brantley's reaction reveals the pull of

appropriative empathy, and the ease with which playwrights, directors, and performers can capitulate to this desire. Nottage, Whoriskey, and the actor playing Salima, Quincy Tyler Bernstine, rightfully preserved the disruption that prevents an appropriative empathy, forcing the audience to recognize their distance from the depicted.

Current understandings of mirror neurons support Nottage's choice to effectively distance the audience through Salima's dramatic death. As discussed earlier, current research on mirror neurons indicates that, "[a]lthough studies have revealed partial overlap in cell excitation in seeing pain and experiencing pain, there is not a complete mirroring" (Cook 79). Nottage's work, then, smartly avoids any attempt to absorb the audience in Salima's pain or to force them to take on her pain as their own. Not only would such an attempt fail, but it also might serve to distract from the true aim of the scene. In Nottage's hands, the scene promises to cause the initial mirror neuron firing that shocks the audience into recognizing Salima's pain, and then provides the distance to process what this sacrifice means, and why it is necessary. Salima's intervention—her final act of resistance—sets in motion a radical alternative to the cycle of violence. The scene ends in her death, and the next scene begins in relative peace and normalcy. The conflict has, for the moment, receded from Mama's door. This peace, however, was by no means guaranteed by Salima's actions, should we attempt to apply them to reality. We are left to assume that Salima's suicide disrupted Osembenga's plans for revenge on Mama Nadi and her employees. But why should this be so? The acts of cruelty at the hands of soldiers that the women have related throughout the play provide no indication that the women's loss would have moved Osembenga and his men to mercy. This is the "affective mediation" of Pedwell's imaginative empathy. The scene sets aside the cause and effect audiences expect from realism and, instead, "imagine[s] affective relationships that move beyond what 'we' already think we know is true or inevitable"

(34). Salima's protest works, and it makes possible an idealized ending. The ending may have its problems, like the standard romantic plot discussed earlier. It should also be noted that her martyrdom—in that her means to end the cycle of violence also required violence—stands as a potential criticism of Nottage's strategy. Nonetheless, it also makes space for a vision of the world in which Salima's protest and the women's efforts result in a victory. Nottage is careful not to create so perfect an ending that the audience is allowed to feel that the crisis is resolved, but neither does her dénouement allow the audience to leave feeling the women of Congo are purely victims.

The effects of the space Nottage creates for imaginative empathy cannot function without its complement: confrontational empathy. Throughout *Ruined*, Nottage demonstrates the interconnectedness of the audience and the women onstage, as well as the women of Congo they represent. Importantly, though, this connection is not simply one of a shared humanity. As affect theorists have concluded, the effect of urging shared humanity between United States citizens and African peoples tends to reproduce a dangerous myth, reinforcing an imagined hierarchy of the free west over a less-free Africa. Such myths not only encourage United States citizens to overlook and minimize human rights' abuses within their own country, but they also encourage a self-aggrandizing pity for those experiencing violence abroad. Pity obfuscates the global marketplace and neoimperialist abuses[10] that incite and fuel conflicts like the Congolese civil war during which *Ruined* is set. To operate against these western positions of opacity, transnational feminist dramas like *Ruined* engage confrontational empathy, which Pedwell

[10] Neoimperialist abuse in the Democratic Republic of Congo stems from—in part—western demands for diamonds and coltan from the region. Nottage directly references the market for these items and their effects in the play, as discussed later.

characterizes in part as making audiences "'responsible to' rather than 'responsible for'" the depicted (174).

Nottage's engagement with confrontational empathy centers on ensuring through means subtle and overt that her audience members are forced to consider their own role in the events depicted onstage. As discussed earlier, Nottage begins the play with the exchange of global goods—lipstick, Belgian chocolates, a variety of cigarette brands—in order to position audience member and Congolese brothel owner on the same chain of global exchange and distribution. Throughout the play, she makes use of this same technique: she confronts audiences with the Congolese women's material reality through materiality—bringing into the theatre space (approximations of) the items of such value in the global marketplace that they have helped tear Congo in two. The early introduction of luxury goods, rather than life essentials, evokes the items the audience members might themselves be carrying, or be eager to buy at intermission. Their presence onstage in an otherwise unfamiliar environment invites the audience to share these simple vanities and pleasures with the characters—but this invitation to identify through material goods will be short lived. While the goods of interest to Mama Nadi in the play's opening evidence the connectedness of globalization, it is coltan and diamonds that directly connect the theatregoer to the violence onstage.

In order to establish the full complexity of challenges created through globalization and corporate greed, the diamonds and coltan so desired in a global market become—in Mama Nadi's brothel—a form of payment for the women's sex work. In the microcosm of the brothel, the soldiers and miners that are Mama Nadi's customers are intentionally blurred—blurred with one another and blurred with the larger marketplace in which they play a part. Nottage must treat the concept of enemies with a degree of ambiguity. Nottage takes little interest in fully

characterizing the women's direct abusers: the Osembenga-led and Kisembe-led forces. In fact, in the Manhattan Theatre Club run of the show, she and director Kate Whoriskey encouraged the rebel and government forces to bleed into one another, becoming eerily interchangeable, by casting the same actors to play both sides (Brantley C1). Whoriskey explains that both Nottage and she were ever aware in researching and staging the work of the abuses and psychological scarring endured by the often very young soldiers compelled to fight on both sides of the conflict (xi). Nottage alludes to the soldiers' trauma at several points in the work, and this careful treatment combined with the overall interchangeability of these men ensures that audiences are not able to project a simplistic vision of evil onto the soldiers the actors are meant to represent, despite the horrors in which they engage.

The vital counterpoint to this careful staging, then, is the materiality of the coltan and diamonds onstage. As Esther Terry explains in her piece, "Land Rights and Womb Rights: Forging Difficult Diasporic Kinships in *Ruined,"* Nottage makes evident that the events onstage result from a range of forces: "While national and local militias battle to rule female-bodied reproductive capacities, dispossessing those who do not belong in their imagined futures, corporate and foreign miners strip natural resources" (161). Throughout the play, miners drift in and out of Mama Nadi's establishment. The audience learns that the miners are primarily searching for coltan, a dull metallic ore found in East Africa. Its connection to a global marketplace is evident in its use:

> When refined, coltan becomes metallic tantalum, a heat-resistant powder that can hold a high electrical charge. These properties make it a vital element in creating capacitors, the electronic elements that control current flow inside miniature circuit boards. Tantalum capacitors are used in almost all cell phones, laptops,

> pagers and many other electronics. The recent technology boom caused the price of coltan to skyrocket to as much as $400 a kilogram at one point, as companies such as Nokia and Sony struggled to meet demand. (Delawala)

Nottage first introduces coltan on the stage as a form of payment for sex with one of Mama's employees. Its material appearance onstage is paired instantly with the violence its presence has prompted in Congo. A rebel soldier "*[p]roudly displays a cloth filled with little chunks of ore"* to Mama, and when she inquires how he—clearly not a miner—came across this valuable bundle, the soldier laughingly codes the murder of the miner from whom he took it: "Dirty poacher been diggin' up our forest, we run 'em off. Run them good, gangsta style: 'Muthafucka run!' Left 'em for the fucking scavengers" (21). Thus, Nottage immediately connects the ore itself and its presence in Mama Nadi's to the cost in human life placed on it in Congo. However, Nottage was doubtless aware when first staging this work in 2008 that many members of her audience would not be familiar with the uses for the ore. Just a few more moments into the scene, then, she ensures the transfer of that knowledge. Mr. Harari, the Lebanese diamond merchant who frequents Mama Nadi's, explains its function when he tells Mama, "Well, my darling, in this damnable age of the mobile phone it's become quite the precious ore" (25). In the space of a few moments, then, Nottage forces each audience member to connect the material present in front of them to the easy murder of its discoverer, and then to the device on silent in their pocket or the purse between their feet. This is confrontational empathy.

The confrontational empathy *Ruined* seeks to elicit maps on well to Damasio's concept of the somatic marker, or the process by which "body-states become linked with our conscious responses to or interpretations of them" (Blair 22). This process runs through an emotion, which must be interpreted and named as a feeling, which then can translate into a behavior. The final

stage, behavior, is a response to the former two stages which "may or may not be associated with reason or rational thought" (Blair 22). Confrontational empathy may draw forth an initial emotion of anger or discomfort—a natural effect of being confronted or called out on complicity or wrongdoing. Savvy audiences who pick up on Nottage's connection of their own cell phones to the exploitation and violence occurring onstage may take a moment to name and understand the emotions rising to the fore, but once they process them, the naming transforms emotions into feelings. Finally, the play and any supplementary materials compiled by the director or dramaturg will translate these feelings into behaviors.

Nottage's discussion around her exposure of coltan in the play further reveals the behaviors—or understandings and actions—she seeks to elicit. She has been very plain in her intent to make use of what I am terming confrontational empathy. She explains that the connection she forces the audience to make is meant to strongly impact them: "Our silence on this issue means that every time we use cell phones, we are inadvertently fueling a war that is being fought on the backs of women" (qtd. in Katrak 34). Her words here are telling. She does not intend a momentary flash of recognition, but rather that her audiences should consider their complicity in the violence Congolese women experience "every time we use cell phones." Subsequent productions have sought to further extend that audience recognition through thorough dramaturgy. The Berkeley Repertory 2011 production, for instance, included a program insert, "Coltan: From the Congo to You" (Paden 154). In this way, the audience comes to recognize not to pity the women of Congo for the direness of their circumstances, but instead to feel—at least in part—"responsible *to*" the women of Mama Nadi's and, more importantly, their real-life counterparts. This reorientation is subtle, but important. In recognizing the effects of American habits of consumption—habits in which they themselves are almost certainly

engaged—any activist engagement prompted by the production has the potential to avoid reproducing the hierarchy of free/less-free that marks the white savior complex. Instead, in recognizing personal wrongdoing, activist engagement may emerge as an acknowledgment of a need for reparations.

While coltan may be less familiar to audiences, they immediately recognize the value of Mama Nadi's raw diamond. Even for western audience members who do not read widely about the abuses in the global marketplace, African diamonds carry with them the echoes of news stories about blood diamonds. As such, audiences are already primed to take careful notice when Mama produces the raw diamond for Mr. Harari's inspection. Nottage imbues the diamond with further symbolic value: it stands as the promise for Mama's autonomy. She views the diamond as her means to escape—and this is key—not the violence around her on the local level, but the violence of the echoes of colonialism and its ongoing neoimperialist presence in Congo today. She tells Mr. Harari of the long legacy of thievery her family has experienced, including a family farm that was taken. Her small speech deserves to be quoted at length:

> Things slip from our fingers like butter. No. When I was eleven, this white man with skin the color of wild berries turned up with a piece of paper. It say he have rights to my family land. (*With acid*) Just like that. Taken! [. . .] Everyone talk talk diamonds, but I . . . I want a powerful slip of paper that says I can cut down forests and dig holes and build to the moon if I choose. I don't want someone to turn up at my door, and take my life from me. Not ever again. But tell, how does a woman like me get a piece of land, without having to pick up a fucking gun? (27)

Her speech makes clear a fact which should be obvious, but which Nottage of course realizes must be made plain for western general audiences: that simply because Congo gained its

independence in 1960 does not mean that it has not endured consistent exploitation as a postcolonial country. Mama's speech emphasizes the vulnerability of a young nation, the laws of which are often written in ways that benefit former colonizers. Mama's rejection of the material diamond onstage in front of audiences in favor of a laughably delicate material by contrast—paper—highlights the extent of corruption Congolese people must face. Mama has learned through her many interactions with outsiders the full power of that slip of paper, demonstrating her understanding of symbolic capital in a capitalist system. What is more, by identifying the race of her thief, Mama importantly upsets any remaining audience tendency to situate the blame for Mama's situation solely on the shoulders of the rebel and government forces Nottage brings to the stage. Toward the end of the play, when Mr. Harari absconds with the diamond in violation of his agreement with Mama, the audience witnesses the cycle of abuse repeat itself.

Eclipsed*: Imagination and Making Audiences Responsible *To

Set in 2003 toward the end of the Second Liberian Civil War, Gurira's *Eclipsed* features an all-woman, all-Black cast; it examines the lives of a group of women captured and kept as sex slaves and homemakers for a commanding officer of the LURD rebel army. Unlike *Ruined*, *Eclipsed* expands beyond the makeshift home of these women, and Gurira also introduces women who have become soldiers themselves, as well as women who are part of the Liberian Women's Initiative—a central force in bringing the Second Civil War to an end. Also unlike *Ruined, Eclipsed* premiered after the events it depicts had come to an end, first playing in 2009 at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, and later on Broadway in 2016. Nonetheless, Gurira still imagined the work as a call to activism. While *Ruined* sought (and seeks) to raise awareness and prompt global action to intervene in the ongoing violence against women in Congo, Gurira pairs the abuses of the Liberian Civil War with ongoing violence in Africa. During the Broadway run, she

explicitly connected the work to the abduction of over 270 school girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Gurira explains: "I've specifically connected to the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. I started to work with the ONE Campaign. That's where I met Emmanuel Ogebe—he's the human-rights lawyer who brings girls who jumped off the truck that night and other people who've been persecuted in Northern Nigeria to the United States, to garner self-determination and education, the two things Boko Haram was trying to rob from them" (qtd. in Ruiz). In the Broadway run of *Eclipsed*, then, Gurira created a space for imaginative and confrontational empathy that seeks to move the audience to agitate for these girls' release and their subsequent autonomy and access to education. As such, Gurira envisions the work as a mobile signifier able to be adapted to challenge a range of human rights' abuses against African women and girls amidst conflict. This adaptation could happen internally through a shift in the play's setting or alternate staging, but to date, Gurira's primary mode of mobility for the work has emerged externally in the lobbies and in participatory processes that follow the performance. As I will discuss, these external choices amplify the play's capacity for confrontational empathy, while the play itself primarily calls for imaginative empathy.

While *Eclipsed*, like *Ruined*, takes an interest in psychological realism, it also makes use of strategic departures that distance audiences from the action. Jeff Paden's analysis of *Ruined* applies just as well to *Eclipsed*: The plays are "maneuvering realism's limitations, renegotiating the form to accomplish a particular activist agenda. [Nottage] achieves this by drawing attention to the act of witnessing itself" (148). Gurira transforms the audience into witnesses of the women's full lives, as opposed to voyeurs of trauma—an act central to the play's engagement with imaginative empathy. Gurira accomplishes her goals by carefully avoiding any staged sexual violence. She takes this concern to an even further extreme by absenting entirely any men

from the work. The play opens on the makeshift home of the women who are being kept for the CO. The setting "*may once have been someone's home*" and, despite ample evidence of the warzone in which it exists, it shows the care and organization of the women who live there (7). This improvised domestic space in which the women cook, do laundry, and style one another's hair recalls the many domestic dramas so common in realism. However, Gurira forcefully disrupts this assumption only a few moments into the play. In the midst of casual conversation, the women suddenly become silent and stand to attention: "*Helena points at herself, goes out*" (11). This tense silence and mimed action is at first unclear. However, once Helena comes back and washes between her legs, the audience comes to understand that this is how the CO summons the women for sex. This violence is presented as a constant lurking threat and has become, for these women, a new normal. In writing the work, then, Gurira had to confront the same key question as Nottage: how can a playwright represent sexual violence in a way that does not normalize or present it as inevitable? Again, playwrights must both avoid a framing that prompts perverse pleasure and must represent violence without making it appear inevitable—as beyond intervention. And again like Nottage, Gurira recognizes that a radically imaginative empathy is needed. In *Eclipsed*, the absent CO makes his presence felt through this summoning device multiple times. The abusers' "felt absences" recall Andrew Sofer's discussion in *Dark Matter*. Borrowing his terminology from physics, Sofer's discussion of "dark matter" refers to the invisible forces at work in theatrical performance—"the 'not there' yet 'not not there'" that the stage creates (4). The break in realism created through Gurira's stage device—and amplified through the stark silence and lighting cues that often accompany it in production—draws the audience's attention back into their own bodies in the theatrical space, ensuring their absorption in the story does not allow them to imagine the separateness of self and other has dissolved. The

"felt absence" of the CO also denies the audience's morbid curiosity or perverse eroticization of these women's realities. Instead, she keeps the audience's attention on the women themselves, transforming the audience into witnesses of trauma, yes, but also the women's full complexity.

The imaginative empathy Gurira invites through the careful staging of the women's space becomes further widened through Gurira's shirking of realism via a split stage. Using a technique I explore more fully in the next chapter, Gurira creates a space of imaginative empathy when she scrambles two moments: one in which Rita—a member of the women's nonviolence group—begins to teach Helena to write her name, and the other in which Maima—or Disgruntled, her war name—teaches The Girl—the youngest and newest arrival to the CO's house—to take up a gun. This action occurs simultaneously on a split stage and carries with it the symbolic resonance of two paths diverging in front of the women: the nonviolent path of self-determination and education or the path that will perpetuate the cycle of violence. The audience is meant to recognize the gravity of the choice in front of the women. Of course, The Girl and Maima do not see it that way, and this fact stands as a criticism of Gurira's oversimplified symbolism. Rather, The Girl believes taking up the gun will mean her autonomy, her means to escape sexual violence (36).

Gurira cements this lack of choice through The Girl's storyline. It becomes clear that her position as a soldier will not bring her true autonomy. Only a month into her training with Maima, Maima tells her she needs to attach herself to a high ranking official in the army, "You need to be lovin' on someone – It go hep you be protected" (43). The Girl's motivation for joining the rebel army dissolves in that moment, and soon the violence required of a soldier surpasses the bounds of cruelty that The Girl can stand. When Maima finally presents The Girl with her war name, Moda's Blessing, the traumas of The Girl's experiences as a soldier

overwhelm her. She confesses that she allowed a young girl captured in a raid to be raped to death, rather than assigning her to be raped by a single soldier; this intervention had been her means as a soldier of protecting women (48). The Girl's breakdown, similar in intensity to Salima's long monologue in *Ruined*, again positions the audience as witnesses to the women's trauma. This moment engages imaginative empathy, as the audience recalls the earlier split stage, and contemplates the path not available. In the midst of the conflict, then, the two paths Gurira presents symbolize not a legitimate choice available to the women of the play, but instead an opportunity for the audience to recognize the lack of choice available.

Like Nottage, Gurira understands that imaginative empathy must be paired with its complement, confrontational empathy. However, her means of confronting the audience differs from Nottage's, as Gurira's recent history play is not requesting immediate intervention for the women depicted onstage. As such, Gurira's work demonstrates the interconnectedness of the world under globalization in slightly less incendiary terms. The women of the play have a somewhat dated, yet wide-ranging knowledge of American culture and politics. Many of the women wear western clothing brands, Maima quotes Tupac freely, and The Girl reads aloud a biography of Bill Clinton to entertain the women with whom she lives. Certainly, Gurira might have pointed directly to the many ways in which the global marketplace continues to exploit Liberian resources, but palm oil, rubber, iron ore, and many other national products are never mentioned in the work. Nonetheless, a savvy audience member still can deduce a subtle accusation of complicity in the Liberian events depicted. The women take particular interest in Clinton's scandalous relationship with Monica Lewinski. Katherine Jean Nigh speaks from her position as an audience member when she says, "[W]e are also aware of the irony that while the United States was focused on the president's sexual activities, there was a war raging on which,

many could argue, we should have paid more attention to than sex in the White House" (461). The women's fascination with this sex scandal reflects back to the American audiences their own absurd fascination with these events. This shared interest creates one layer of confrontational empathy by encouraging audiences to critique their own reactions to this American scandal, and to ponder their own complicity in the neoimperialism they may have failed to notice as they allowed their minds to be consumed by the scandal. By and large, though, Gurira's references to western culture in the play itself function more to evoke imaginative empathy—a common ground and mutual investment—than explicitly confrontational empathy.

Her evocation of confrontational empathy, then, emerges much more clearly in the ways in which she paired the play with the Bring Back Our Girls campaign for its Broadway run. This connection forms one means of transforming the play into a mobile signifier, preventing the work from being regarded as merely a period piece. Gurira's external approach aligns with Nicola Shaugnessy's advocacy of participatory theatre and its empathic engagement, and in so doing, expands upon the internal confrontational empathy exhibited in *Ruined*. To explore the effect of the play-campaign pairing, one must first understand the impact of naming in the play itself. The women of the play's primary setting, the CO's shelter, do not call each other by their names. Instead, they are numbered "wives" of the CO, a ranking system determined by date of arrival at the shelter, and a system that carries with it a hierarchy within the home they make. Helena is Number One, and The Girl becomes Number Four. When The Girl, who Helena and Bessie have attempted to hide from the CO, is caught and raped and added to their number, she falls into this system with the appearance of ease. When Helena learns what has happened, she asks The Girl if she is okay; The Girl responds, "Jus' let me sleep, I say I fine, whot number I is?" (13). Throughout the first scenes, the women continually pull rank based on this numbering

system, but the audience is never encouraged to accept the suppression of the women's names as natural. Their names stand in for their autonomous and full selves, and their absence functions instead as a ghostly presence. The suppressed names function to haunt the women's numbers, both because the audience will find this suppressed identity unnatural—taking and owning a name is a cross-cultural means of forming the self—and because the erasure of names and the suppression of humanity in so doing was (and remains) part of the cultural conversation in the United States during the Broadway run of the show. The #SayHerName and #SayTheirNames hashtags asking Americans to give voice to the many victims of police violence echo underneath the similar dehumanization of the women onstage. As I will discuss, Gurira took advantage of this ghosting in the different activist campaign she chose to pair with the Broadway run.

Through the character of Rita, Gurira emphasizes the significance of the absent names. Rita meets Maima and knows her initially only as Number Two or Disgruntled. She tries to find out Maima's given name, but Maima refuses to tell her. Maima identifies her name with the trauma enacted on her body, a part of herself that she has buried to ensure her survival. She tells Rita, "You trying to mek us weak. You want us to start to feel like little gals crying – 'Ooh, I lost my ma, ooh, ooh, I lost my pa, dey hurt me, dey rape me.' I no do dat no more, go to de villages if you looking for stupid gal like dat. I hep mek women strong" (40). In the play's final moments, the women learn that the civil war is over. The CO no longer will hold them captive, and those who have attempted to embrace the life of a soldier and the war name that came with it must consider alternatives. As these alternative names thrust on them by circumstance and violence fall abruptly away, Helena begins a process of renaming.

Bessie: Whot you packing for, Number One?

> Helena: Helena. H-E-L-E-N-A. Helena. Dat my nem. I not sure about my last nem, I tink it Sowa, Sona, or sometin'. I tink it Sowa. I need to remember all dese ting now. (51)

Helena's strength and determination in the face of uncertainty ensure that the audience sees her, and by extension many others, as survivors, rather than victims. This moment creates further space for imaginative empathy. However, on its own, as a piece of history that does not ask for further action, the moment may do little to encourage audience members to find a means to involve themselves in transnational feminist causes.

In the Broadway run, Gurira did not allow this moving symbolism of naming to disappear as audiences applauded the performance and gathered their things to leave. Following the curtain call, a cast member would speak briefly of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, and single out one of the 219 Chibok girls then still in captivity.[11] She would share a few details about the girl, and then ask the audience, in unison, to speak the girl's name aloud. Gurira described this ritual: "The collaboration [. . .] has allowed for us to start actually putting the names of these girls in the mouths of our audiences. We hope that this play puts a burden on the hearts of our audiences, to know that this is an issue in the world that we could all help to eradicate in ways big or small" (Ruiz). Gurira's description aligns perfectly with the purpose behind creating space for confrontational empathy. The audience must speak the name of a real girl who is likely enduring, perhaps that very moment, the events to which they have just been made witnesses. Now that they cannot feign ignorance about the girl's existence or even about a particular campaign designed to aid her, they bear the burden of being "responsible *to*" the girl they have just named.

[11] Information about this campaign was included in each Playbill. A flyer listed every single one of the 219 girls' names under the #KnowHerName hashtag. The Playbill also included an additional flyer referring to Gurira's 10,000 Girls initiative which brings underserved young women from the tri-state area to see a Broadway show. This latter flyer appeared under the heading, "*Eclipsed* is more than a play. It's a movement."

While the majority of Gurira's action within the play calls on somatic markers and mirror neurons in much the same way that Nottage's does, this final moment of activism deserves additional focus. As discussed above, many cognitive science theorists interested in mirror neurons have traced audience mirroring or reaction. Anna Fenemore emphasizes that audience members are "'being moved' (bodily) by performer and event such that they begin to experience kinaesthetic sensations normally attributed to their own intentional acts of moving, touching or seeing" (qtd in Shaugnessy 63). While Fenemore takes interest here in the action of the performance itself, Gurira's choice to disrupt audience expectations afterward cleverly extends the effects Fenemore observes. Gurira's intervention demands conscious, bodily mirroring of the actors onstage. Audience members are asked to stand and face the actors onstage, adopting the same pose, thereby becoming the actor's mirror image. Then, audience members produce the same words in concert with the actors—a name. This mirroring occurs at just the moment an audience member expects a full break from any degree of immersion—a full reclamation of their minds and bodies—as they had moments earlier planned to gather their belongings and begin plotting a path to the theatre's exit. The act of repeating the girl's name—and doing so alongside an actor whose presence remains imbued or haunted by the role they have just concluded—effectively merges imaginative and confrontational empathy; the audience member may, through mirroring, take on one last time a hint of the residual trauma that continues to haunt the actor exiting the role of the character, while simultaneously acknowledging through that empathy their responsibility to the school girl they have just named.

Conclusion

By examining Nottage's *Ruined* and Gurira's *Eclipsed* through the lenses of affect theory, cognitive theory, and transnational feminisms, their careful pairing of imaginative and

confrontational empathy becomes clear. Activist drama and performance that engage these two types of empathy present a way forward for transnational feminist theatre—particularly those forms of theatre seeking activist engagement from their audiences. This examination continues to rewrite the old suspicion that marks dramatic realism as a socially- or politically-conscious form of theatre. What is more, in aligning such works—works that are performed primarily for American or western audiences—with transnational feminist aims, they continue efforts to decenter western white feminism in the United States. The balance of empathies contributes to this decentering in two ways. First, through imaginative empathy, the audiences are asked to recognize nonwestern women as full individuals, rather than dehumanized numbers in media reports of war violence or as a monolith of less-civilized, less-free victims. Then, through confrontational empathy, these playwrights encourage audiences to understand the United States' role in neoimperialism in Africa, and their own complicity as consumers in the resultant violence. Once western audiences recognize the African women who have inspired these stories as full and complex humans, and have confronted their complicity in the violence acted upon these women, audiences can begin to set aside hierarchical notions of pity and superiority, and instead come to see transnational feminist engagement in these regions as a means of reparations—the minimum of what is owed and, by this point, freely given.

This chapter adopts affect theory and cognitive science to drill down into what lends the works of this study their activist underpinnings, and in so doing, it expands transnational feminist theory to incorporate theatrical activism. The works of this chapter in particular demand a focus on empathic engagement because the playwrights' subject matter requires especially careful treatment given American apathy and the general dangers, as Adichie puts it, of a single story that so many Americans and American media perpetuate about Africa. The later chapters of this

study merge transnational feminist theory—particularly the theory of scrambling—with critical race and feminist performance theory from Soyika Diggs Colbert: black movements. As I will demonstrate, transnational feminist theory and Colbert's black movements are deeply committed to activism. While the mechanics of activist theatre—brain chemistry and audiences' physical responses to performance—do not feature as centrally in the later chapters, the groundwork laid here for its function should be understood as underpinning the works of the later chapters.

Chapter Three:

Globalization and Black Movements: "Scrambling" Spaces in Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter's *In the Continuum* and Robert O'Hara's *Antebellum*

> Modernity itself as a conceptual apparatus needs to be scrambled; the ideological traffic between cultural absolutism and cultural relativism would have to be made visible. In addition, linearity would not be constituted solely on the outside—that is, operating elsewhere. Scrambling time would mean that there is no neat, discrete demarcation between and among state or heterosexualizing processes on the inside and those undertaken on the outside, among conceptual categories and historical processes. (M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing,* 191)

M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) adopts a transnational feminist methodology she calls "scrambling" to expose intertwined oppressive ideologies.[12] She investigates national policies across the globe alongside less tangible ideologies of the public imaginary, finding common threads that inform and uphold social injustice. As discussed in the previous chapter, the methodology of scrambling is, in essence, a wide-ranging comparative study of such oppressive ideologies with the aim of bringing their obscured commonalities into view. Although emerging from different fields, Alexander's feminist sociopolitical theory and Soyica Diggs Colbert's *Black Movements*—a performance theory text—illuminate one another. Through framing Alexander's scrambling as a black movement, scrambling becomes a means through which to analyze performance, while retaining its cogent investigation of sociopolitical context. This combined approach reveals theatre's role in forging transnational alliances and coalition-building across distances that may otherwise collapse into insurmountable difference.

[12] Alexander speaks directly of "heterosexualizing processes" here, but her argument and employment of scrambling recognize broader, intersectional identities subject to similar processes.

In keeping with Alexander's call for a wider comparative apparatus, contemporary drama and performance developed in the United States must be broadened beyond a national focus to include a range of African diasporic writers. At the same time, transnational feminist inquiry stresses that scholars take care not to ignore the specificities of place and culture. My particular study, then, examines plays written by United States citizens whose work often critiques United States' policies and the nation's larger neoimperialist ideologies. As a result, this work forces the authors' fellow citizens to recognize common causes and needs that create a basis for broader coalition both at home and transnationally. Uniquely, this work makes use of the framework of the African diaspora and its extant transnational ties to concretize a shared investment in the material realities of today's world under globalization. In this chapter, I explore two such works: Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter's *In the Continuum* (2005) and Robert O'Hara's *Antebellum* (2009). Through an investigation of the scrambling in which these plays engage, their commitment to transnational feminist methodologies—intentionally or otherwise—presents black theatre that transforms long-recognized diasporic interconnection into a vision of an alternative reality through a shared investment that spans national boundaries. This work, then, helps define African diasporic performance—Paul Carter Harrison's term—which I advance and broaden to recognize the contributions of the works of my study.

Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter's *In the Continuum* (2005) scrambles African and African diasporic sites. *In the Continuum* tells the stories of two black women alongside one another—Abigail, a Zimbabwean woman in Harare, and Nia, an American woman in South Central, L.A. The audience watches as the women—completely unknown to each other and some 10,000 miles apart—discover that they are pregnant and, later, that they have seroconverted. The parallels of their lives are plain, demanding the audience bridge the gap of geographical space

and cultural difference to see their realities as materially intertwined. Gurira and Salter illustrate these commonalities both through the mirroring of the characters' lived experiences over the course of the work, and through repeated scrambling of the separate spaces onstage that symbolize the geographic and cultural gulf separating the two.

Before parsing the authors' engagement with scrambling, the larger function of the methodology should be examined. Scrambling in its original context (i.e. when parted from my connection to Colbert's black movements) is not a tool to investigate theatrical performance, but a sociopolitical comparative apparatus revealing intertwined oppressive ideologies. Before I examine scrambling as a black movement, it is first useful to outline its function as Alexander intended it. To this end, I will first explore the broader context of the original production of Gurira and Salter's play. In 2006-2007, the play found a transnational audience in its African and American tour. However, the authors first began piecing the work together from separate one-woman shows they were each creating during their time at NYU. The fused piece premiered at Primary Stages in New York in 2005, directed by Robert O'Hara. Presumably, then, its first audiences were largely comprised of United States citizens. Here, the importance of paying heed to cultural specificity in the process of scrambling must be made clear. In drawing obvious parallels between the two women, the play belies the neatness of the narrative of the first/third-world divide—the divide through which the United States continues to imagine itself as superior, civilized, and progressive. At its core, the fundamental intervention of the play is its undercutting of this narrative. For a popular American audience, simply staging a Zimbabwean woman of some means with a career and dreams of a future in journalism begins to undo a degree of the erasure that is a necessary precondition of American exceptionalism. This central intervention, then, is one long discussed in feminist and critical race theory—one of representation. In 2009,

Nigerian novelist Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie delivered a speech titled "The Danger of a Single Story" that exposed, in part, the ongoing myopia of the American representation of Africa and Africans. Adichie explains that her time spent in the United States has revealed to her the single story of Africa that American media and popular representation most often upholds, one of "incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS." Salter and Gurira's play does not deny an African AIDS crisis, but through a humanizing depiction of Abigail, and through the scrambling that reminds Americans of the AIDS crisis ongoing in their own country, the authors poke holes in the American neoimperialist narrative.

In keeping, then, with a broader call, a primary function of scrambling in the hands of Salter and Gurira is to, in the words of Alexander, avoid collapsing "distance into difference" (189). Instead, through scrambling these sites, Gurira and Salter's play resonates with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "one-third world" and "two-thirds world" understanding of the world in the age of globalization. In *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Mohanty offers these alternative terms as a corrective to the first/third world binary because her distinction draws attention to the (dis)continuities between the haves and have-nots within the boundaries of nations and between nations and indigenous communities (227). Drawing on the work of Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, these terms signify social majorities and minorities which cannot be divided along geographical lines (227). *In the Continuum* invites American audiences to rethink claims of American exceptionalism by staging a strongly middle class, professional African woman alongside American Nia, an unemployed, but working class woman slipping in and out of the cracks of the United States' social services system. The moment in which these women learn they have contracted HIV demonstrates the unexpected continuities between them, while simultaneously highlighting the discontinuities among United States' citizens—in terms of class,

race, and the way these factors correlated to a statistically-significant vulnerability to HIV at the time of Gurira and Salter's writing.

This vulnerability in the years leading up to the 2005 premiere of *In the Continuum* drove the play's creation. In a brief introductory note to the play, Gurira and Salter explain, "*In the Continuum* was born of our profound concern for the experience of black women in the present fight against HIV/AIDS. Black women currently represent the highest rate of new infection both in the US and Africa" (502). 2005 marked a turning point in black women's seroconversion rates; significant declines in contraction suggest activist and government outreach efforts have been largely successful. Yet, the concern that prompted Gurira and Salter to join a larger conversation for AIDS awareness has by no means been resolved. In Zimbabwe, "New infections dropped by 34% between 2005 and 2013 [. . .] Yet there were still 69,000 new infections in 2013" ("HIV and AIDS"). In the United States, "From 2005 to 2014, the number of new HIV diagnoses among African American women fell 42%" ("HIV Among African Americans"). However, recent years continue to show the disproportionate vulnerability of black women: "In 2014, an estimated 1,350 Hispanic/Latino women and 1,483 white women were diagnosed with HIV, compared to 5,128 African American women" ("HIV Among African Americans"). Thus, in recognizing and depicting the transnational disproportionate vulnerability of black women, the authors begin the work of scrambling to create a basis for what Colbert terms black freedom practices. Freedom practices are the results of black movements in performance, because performance enables, Colbert argues, "active engagement with the past that transforms not only what will be but also what was" ("Epilogue" 271). Such work, then, can access both previously unimagined futures and the African (diasporic) histories obscured through western white supremacist-dominated storytelling.

The transformative reimagining inherent in freedom practices is particularly relevant in these authors' work, given the ongoing misinformation and misperceptions circulating around HIV/AIDS. Increasingly, American audiences display a lack of engagement with the topic following the medical advancements in the 1980s and 1990s. Theatre and AIDS scholar David Román has discussed the rhetoric underlying the waning of creative and activist engagement with HIV/AIDS, which he calls "post-AIDS discourse" (51). He argues that these varied approaches all "encourage[] us to believe that the immediate concerns facing contemporary American culture [. . .] are not about AIDS" (53). In effect, the deprioritization of HIV/AIDS has led the American popular imagination to dismiss the disease as largely a nonissue—to believe, in oversimplified terms, that it no longer happens "here." Conversely, as Adichie argues, the same American popular imagination locates Africa as the place where AIDS does happen—a vague statistic turned generalized truth, and one too far removed, too much "over there" to be confronted here. Gurira and Salter recognize the erasure inherent in both of these views, and via their scrambling, they accomplish their goal: "a representation of the humanity behind the statistics and an invitation for more unheard stories to be brought 'In(to) the Continuum'" (502).

Scrambling as a Black Movement in *In the Continuum*

As seen above, in Alexander's original use of the term, scrambling functions as a comparative apparatus for transnational feminist analysis. It calls for engagement with the material realities of oppressed populations and the ideologies that enable that oppression. This application remains relevant for my study because the authors pull from current events or black histories in order to critique these same ideologies. When positioned as a black movement, however, scrambling becomes a means to apply that same critical lens to theatrical performance. Colbert defines black movements as "embodied actions (a change in position, place, posture, or

orientation) that draw from the imagination and the past to advance political projects" and as actions that "participate in political movements by creating links across time and space" (*Black Movements* 5, 19). These two partial definitions perfectly graph onto the sociopolitical aims of scrambling; indeed, "links across time and space" are the fundamental aim of scrambling as Alexander uses it. However, scrambling as a black movement enables scholars to read and analyze bodies in performance, recognizing the unique contributions of theatre as a freedom practice. This scrambling examines staged bodies as they engage in movements that open potentialities for radically reimagined futures—yes, for the characters depicted, but also these new imaginings have the power to transform audiences by reshaping the realities they thought possible. Ultimately, such work uncovers transnational continuities and broadens possible networks for black freedom practices.

In demonstrating the transnational continuities for black women, Salter and Gurira use the symbolism of the African diaspora as the substance for scrambling as a black movement. *In the Continuum* features two actors who play the central roles of Abigail and Nia, but also a score of other supporting characters. The play begins with the actors depicting not Abigail and Nia, but two children playing hopscotch and exchanging rhymes and taunts. One child slips between Shona and English, and the other speaks in English exclusively.

> Child #1: Come on! Com' on! I wanna play . . . I wanna play hopscotch [. . .]
>
> Child #2: Okay saka, totamba chi? Totamba nodo here? Va! (503)

They are in dialogue and playing together, but, at times, they overwrite each other, speaking the same content in different languages. This text overlaps and circles back, requiring the audience to distance themselves from the play as a realistic scene. Instead, the scene functions as a symbol of the children's interconnectedness, despite the linguistic divide and its indication of geographic

and cultural difference. As the scene progresses, the actors "separate into their distinct worlds" (504), effecting the split stage that will mark the rest of the performance. This marks the play's first instance of scrambling as a black movement—a physical, embodied shift onstage that recalls the movement of the middle passage. As the actors step away from one another to their separate sides of the stage, the children's connection stretches across the Atlantic and into discrete national affiliations but does not break. It guides the audience to understand that the African diaspora denotes distance and cultural difference, but also ongoing interconnectedness. The blocking of this brief prologue, then, positions the two women's stories as always-already scrambled, mutually invested, although they are never known to each other.[13]

As the play progresses, the actors' bodies continue to function as the site for scrambling on stage. The frame of black movements scrambles the women's stories in a way that demonstrates interconnectedness without the vagaries that can mar characterizations of the African diaspora. Continually, the women parallel each other, discovering pregnancy, HIV, cheating partners, and barriers to confronting those partners alongside each other. Importantly, after the brief prologue, the actors never leave their separate sides of the stage. However, the

[13] The interconnectedness of the African diaspora has proven to be fraught territory in postcolonial and dramatic theory. Paul Carter Harrison aligns what he terms Black Thea(tre) (and elsewhere in his work, African Diasporic Performance) firmly within a diasporic aesthetic—one centered on a spirituality specific to the African continuum; he calls for further "investigations of African rituals, Caribbean Carnival, or even Black Church for stylizations consonant with African continuity in the diaspora" (589). Harrison's phenomenological and formalist approach and concomitant focus on such broad and shifting ideas as "spirituality" present significant challenges for artists interested in issues of social justice and the material realities of global capital. Wide characterizations of interconnectedness can, if deployed without great care, risk collapse into exoticism—especially in the hands of those without direct experience of the Africans with whom one claims affinity. Sandra L. Richards has argued, "[C]ontinental Africans are visible to many diaspora Africans only to the extent that they appear to be different, located in a time frame impervious to change" (102). Richards's understanding highlights a tendency to view Africa as a land of ancestors—and an imagined land at that—rather than a place of current vitality. Thus, after their short opening scene, Gurira and Salter strongly resist tropes of mysticism or spirituality that risk exoticizing Africa. Danai Gurira's own hybridity doubtless helps her wield a more nuanced pen. She has identified as "Zamerican" because she was born in the United States but lived in Zimbabwe from ages five to nineteen (Gurira and Salter, "*Theater Talk*"). Her nuanced portrayal of the Zimbabwean traditional healer in the play is a good example of the subtlety she employs.

careful two-woman casting leads the events of these women's lives to intrude on and interrupt one another in the telling. This choice is intentional. It would be simple to dissolve the split stage and have the two actors portray a scene from Nia's life, and then one from Abigail's. Gurira and Salter reject this simplistic turn-taking, opting instead to leave the split stage intact. This means that one actor consistently portrays a woman in Zimbabwe, and the other a woman in the United States. This staged space between their bodies reproduces the central characters' geographic divide, but rather than emphasizing the distance, it reveals their commonalities. Scene Three, "The Diagnosis," illustrates this overlap most clearly. One actor plays a Zimbabwean nurse speaking to Abigail; the other plays Nia, receiving her diagnosis in the United States.

> **Nurse Mugobo:** (*looks at clipboard, talking to* **Abigail**) Right, Mrs. Choto? You are not Mrs. Choto. Mrs. Choto, Mrs. Choto!
>
> **Nia:** That is my real name. Why would I—Can I go!
>
> **Nurse Mugobo:** Ha, and vanhu vaterna vanonetsa. (*Flips to next chart.*) [. . .] Abigail? Right (*Looks through chart.*) I have your chart here . . .
>
> **Nia:** My chart? Ya'll gon' call--? (*Sucking her teeth.*)
>
> **Nurse Mugobo:** Everything looks fi—oh.
>
> **Nia:** What?
>
> **Nurse Mugobo:** You have tested HIV positive. (512)

The actors' bodies are positioned across a divide, but dissolving the divide with dialogue that functions seamlessly across two story lines. These scenes display scrambling as a black movement. Although the actors' spaces and characters' stories remain discrete, the fused telling forges a connection through which these women can speak to each other. A connection born of similarities that span an invisibly divided stage and more than 10,000 miles.

The scrambling as a black movement in *In the Continuum* functions, as Colbert intends, to present an alternative vision of what is possible in global AIDS activism. Gurira and Salter use the actors' bodies to root a mutual investment in the African diaspora's originary division, and proceed to argue for a continued mutual investment by situating their scrambling in material reality. As discussed above, the authors felt the need to create this work due to the statistical vulnerability of African diasporic women to HIV/AIDS; thus, the work itself, conceived as a means of activism, is fundamentally situated in material realities of the lives that inspired it. As their separate events unfold, Abigail and Nia reveal some of the critiques and misconceptions that inhibit the formation and sustainability of transnational coalition. When a nurse tells Nia of her seroconversion, Nia rejects the results: "You trying say I'ma hoe? Do I look like a junkie? Do I look like I'm gay? Do I look like I'm from Africa?" (513). In these moments, the split stage and actors' bodies positioned oppositionally threaten to function as the intercultural barrier it might initially appear to be. In this response, Nia reveals the environmental conditioning that led her to believe herself safe from HIV/AIDS. In her mind, HIV is not an American problem, save for drug addicts and gay men, whose humanity—and thus citizenship—she undermines. The lines drawn for her effect clear separations, abjecting those groups against which she believes she must define herself. Nia's aspirations to rise from poverty via marriage to the rising basketball star, Darnell, have encouraged her to invest in hierarchies that impede her recognition of the mutual benefits of broader coalition—both within the United States and transnationally. Just as Nia's environment encourages her to dismiss Africa in its entirety as a "single story," Abigail's government's influence encourages her to reject America as a neoimperialist monolith. Abigail's work as a newsreader for the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation presents opportunities to critique western neoimperialism and the propagandistic nature of government-

run press services in Zimbabwe. Early in the play, Abigail reads that government ministers "warned against any reports by the biased and slandering Western Media which assert that Zimbabwe is facing a famine" (504-05). In the world of the play, the heavy-handed adjectives of her script would doubtless be interpreted by the majority of her Zimbabwean audience as clear attempts to shape their judgment about western media and the people and ideologies it represents—particularly for those of her audience who have first-hand knowledge of food shortages.[14] While, in this case, western media is being falsely discredited, the extent to which this strategy may be effective indicates a broader suspicion against western stereotype-laden coverage of Africa—a suspicion often justified, as Adichie's characterization of western media indicates. Thus, the authors use the two women as case studies in divisions that impede transnational recognition and collaboration—a threat given visual impact onstage via the actors' physical separateness.

However, while the presentation of obstacles to coalition demands notice, the scrambled form of the play and its focus on materiality present paths for greater recognition. M. Jacqui Alexander provides an example of this recognition born of scrambling—this undoing of erasure—in her focus on women workers: "When action research enables the women who work at Santa Anita Packers in Mexico, at one end of the food chain, to trace the destination of their labor to the women who work at food stores in Canada, the other end of the chain, they become visible to one another and interrupt the corporate invisibility that has been placed on them" (105). I find value in Alexander's term, "action research," and argue that the scrambling—

[14] A 2005 article in the *Independent* titled "Zimbabwe's Secret Famine" provides insight into Robert Mugabe's attempts to downplay crisis in Zimbabwe and discredit foreign reporters in the process. Article author Daniel Howden explains, "Foreign reporters have been expelled and millions of pounds have been spent on strengthening the secret police force, the CIO, in order to infiltrate civil society and opposition groups. In this atmosphere of intimidation and misinformation many Zimbabweans have little idea of what is happening outside their immediate surroundings."

particularly the embodied scrambling as a black movement—may be understood as a form of action research. As seen above in the characters' scrambled conversation, the actors' intertwined dialogue belies the separateness of their bodies. In fact, Nia even parallels the example Alexander provides for action research; Nia recognizes her position within an exploitative system when she outlines the chain of labor that created the purse that she has lifted from Nordstrom: "it only cost fifty cents for these companies to make; they only pay Javier and them ten cents to put it together; they pay me five wack ass dollars an hour, then they go sell it for a hundred and fifty? Do I look like a dummy?" (507). Her indictment of this full trail of inadequate compensation places her within a group of world workers who have the basis for coalition—even if this one-off statement may not position her as ready to engage in this work. Nonetheless, such moments encourage the audience to view the split stage as an artificial divide—a barrier only mistaken as insurmountable, but one in fact that is porous and easily bridged. Furthermore, the audience, sitting with their own purses and other markers of this chain of exploitation, must come to see themselves as complicit. This moment—another fine example of the confrontational empathy discussed in Chapter Two—widens the opportunities for audience members to consider their place within globalization, broadening the impact of staged black movements to transnational feminist activism.

Continuum and Forms of Coalition

These many instances of scrambling in Salter and Gurira's work make transnational ties visible—a necessary first step in forging transnational coalition and investment. Such black movements make use of this methodology to transition the shared identification of the African diaspora into shared ground for global activism. *In the Continuum* and Gurira's subsequent works have proven particularly fruitful vehicles for encouraging collective action. Briefly, I want

to explore potential activist impacts of staged black movements; as vehicles for activism, it is useful to trace what can happen when we view scrambling as a black movement taking a first step in a chain of global activism. This exploration is particularly possible with *In the Continuum* because, as Gurira has said, "If my work is on the stage, you can [rest assured] I'm going to make use of it as a platform for activism as much as possible" (qtd. in Ruiz). Her website, *Love Our Girls,* has become a hub through which she can amplify the activism that she pairs with her theater. This site provides concrete examples of the many forms of coalition that black movements can prompt.[15] In practice, *In the Continuum* can be associated with at least three discrete forms of coalition-building. First, Gurira makes space for global coalition through theater-making, creating a transnational network of theater groups and providing a platform for mutual recognition. For instance, her website brings attention to a new NYC-based theater group, Girl Be Heard, whose global awareness she praises: "I had never quite seen this before. American girls acknowledging their position on the global stage and their responsibility to bring focus to those who may not be able to draw focus to themselves" (Gurira, "Be Heard!"). These promotion efforts grow the theater community and provide more opportunities for activist/theater-makers. Second, coalition can mean thoughtful donation to services invested in, as Gurira's site says, providing women and girls worldwide with "the same opportunities [as men] and appropriate protections" ("Why I"). *In the Continuum* in particular focused on fundraising and education to combat seroconversion for black women. Donations of this type are easily actionable for her audience members and made accessible in playbills and post-/pre-

[15] In addition to the three forms of coalition-building discussed in the above paragraph, the website also serves as a hub to connect its readers to a wide range of global feminist movements. By signing up for the newsletter or browsing multiple pages, readers can learn about and connect to movements from TIME'S UP to ONE's Global Goal #5, a gender equality goal targeting the world's poorest countries with an aim to enact reforms that will, for instance, "give women equal rights to economic resources" (*Love Our Girls*).

production discussions; they are, of course, also available to the broader world public via the internet. Third, *In the Continuum*'s 2006-07 American and African tour was accompanied by education and outreach efforts on the ground—efforts that often shift and change to suit the needs and desires of specific communities. For instance, Gurira's planned theater workshop outside of Harare became "a chaotic two-hour empowerment session with an audience of more than 100 young men and women aged 15 to 25, none of them theater students" (Graham). Gurira's use of her own diasporic identity as grounds for involvement may inspire other diasporic theatre-makers to follow suit.

In the Continuum, its productions, and its related media and movements, then, all practice a form of transnational feminism that deserves far greater critical and popular notice. However, one note of caution must be mentioned, and voicing it helps me transition to the quite different employment of transnational feminism in this chapter's next work, *Antebellum*. While *In the Continuum* importantly addresses concerns of women's oppression and neoimperialism, the play does, in some ways, deserve criticism for its heteronormativity. The play takes little interest in disrupting stereotypes of black masculinity; it represents both Nia's and Abigail's partners as serial philanderers with no interest in the women's health or safety. This simplistic villainization, paired with Nia's unproblematized connection of homosexuality and AIDS, prompts concern over the limits of the play's scope. On the other hand, it is equally possible to criticize the extreme critical focus on black art, a focus that demands too much of a single work. It is important to assert that the range of representations of contemporary black theatre and the issues the authors take on become a necessary means of broadening blackness and its intersections on stage. In pairing these two works, Gurira and Salter's transnational feminism is complemented and enriched by that of O'Hara.

Robert O'Hara's *Antebellum*

Similar to *In the Continuum* and its history of production, Robert O'Hara's *Antebellum* (2009) draws on the interconnectedness of the African diaspora. However, O'Hara's work does not present clear visions for coalition-building; instead, it scrambles to make visible through-threads of oppressive ideologies against which United States' citizens often define themselves—revealing these ideologies as palimpsestic across time and space. In her *Pedagogies of Crossing,* Alexander conceptualizes history as palimpsestic; she likens the record of the past to an overwritten, but imperfectly erased parchment. Its imperfect erasure ensures that the past remains always visible in the present, disrupting western conceptions of time as linear and progressive (190). Alexander's scrambling makes visible the overwritten layers of the palimpsest and its surprising commonalities of oppressive ideologies, despite the dexterity with which they shift and mold themselves to the particularities of geopolitical spaces and cultural moments. Alexander's notion of the palimpsest becomes especially relevant for O'Hara's work because both writers are invested in the function of the palimpsest to expose the intersections of racism and heterosexism and queerphobia across time and space.

By merging Alexander's scrambling with Colbert's black movements, the specific contributions of theatre in this transnational feminist activism becomes clear. What stands out in O'Hara's play, however, is not a mode of scrambling that aligns with black movements as Colbert defines them; Colbert says, "black movements reshape temporalities in order to reorganize the social and cultural fields that facilitate the social and physical deaths of black people" ("Epilogue" 265). Nowhere in this work does scrambling reorganize those social and cultural fields in ways that radically imagine a different path; rather, it lays those fields bare. Scrambling in O'Hara's hands rejects the erasure of past traumas, instead bringing them fully

into view—an act that preserves violent histories with an eye towards preventing their recurrence. O'Hara scrambles, then, both his settings and the identities of several white characters through revealing their shared violent ideologies. The effect of the latter cannot rightly be called a black movement, but rather what I will term in what follows an anti-black movement. My term captures my indebtedness to Colbert for this line of thinking, while recognizing the necessary differences in applying scrambling-as-a-black-movement to the embodied movements of white actors portraying racist characters. In that way, "anti-black" works well because of its resonance with anti-black racism. O'Hara's scramble settings by placing 1936 Berlin in conversation with 1939 Atlanta—but an Atlanta putting on the antebellum frills in preparation for the *Gone with the Wind* world premiere. Echoes of slavery, Jim Crow, Nazi antisemitism and racism, and binaric gender identity are all scrambled across these two ostensibly discrete geographic sites. The crossing and re-forming of these various intersections demonstrate shared oppressive logics and psychologies that do not prominently feature in typical narratives of the American role in World War II.

As in *In the Continuum, Antebellum* creates intentional scrambling between the two discrete sites being staged. The stage directions pose a challenge for set designers; O'Hara asks them to ensure the interconnectedness of these sites: "It is important that the two settings 'read' as one home. An Atlanta and Germany 'bleeding' into one another" (414). O'Hara speaks plainly of his intended message. Miriam Weisfeld, dramaturg for the Woolly Mammoth Theatre production in 2009, recalls speaking with O'Hara about his motivation in bringing these sites together. O'Hara explains that plantations are "museums now and there's a decency and protocol to visiting. Like, 'this is Monticello: this is where they churned butter!' But to me, it's a concentration camp" (qtd. in Weisfeld). O'Hara's use of concentration camps is a strategic

rhetorical tool. The vast majority of American audiences recognize the horror of the Holocaust—a horror that recalls indelible images of shrunken, stacked bodies—and that remembered/reconstructed horror, while potentially traumatizing, does not encounter active resistance in such audiences. After all, the American role in WWII helped eliminate German-controlled concentration camps, so the emotions aroused by such images need not be complicated with guilt. The same cannot be said for the horrors of slavery on American soil.

As tourist sites, plantations have become, as O'Hara indicates, eerily neutralized spaces in the United States. My own tour of Oak Alley Plantation just outside New Orleans in January 2015 is a case in point. The guided house tour revealed itself as a performance designed to erase not only racist violence, but the very existence of black folks in the antebellum period. The space enabled a performance that functions as clearly as any can as an anti-black movement. The tour—conducted by a white guide in period dress—included only the most cursory mention of the enslaved population whose labor enabled the plantation to thrive. Instead, the tour detailed the history of the white family that owned the house and the grounds' inhabitants. The vivid retelling of the quotidian lives of the owners' family through generations—completely divorced from the source of their wealth—and the sympathetic stories detailing how the family weathered the postbellum era revealed a strong investment in erasure that the very house belied. In the dining room, a member of the tour group asked what the wooden structure was above the table. The guide explained that it was a manually-operated fan, and in so doing, identified the cord in the corner of the room that would need to be pulled to operate it. The linguistic gymnastics the guide exercised in this explanation are telling; pure passive voice did not suffice, so eventually she explained that "an individual" would stand in the corner to operate the fan. The felt absence in the room became palpable. The tour guide persisted in this language, referring only to "the

other individuals" of the plantation when referencing the enslaved. My tour group was told to walk over to the three reproduced slave cabins and to read the plaques posted there, should we wish to discover information about these "other individuals." Upon inspection, the slave cabins included sparse details about the actual lives of the enslaved. Individual identities were deemed lost and unrecoverable. A list of names from various bills of sale appeared on one wall, but the genealogies, anecdotes, or postbellum lives of these people and their descendants did not appear. Instead, the cabins primarily offered information about the slaves' labor and the various technologies of antebellum farming. As we sipped our praline coffees and watched a white man hammer nails into shape in the blacksmith outbuilding, the plantation's efforts to create a festive atmosphere instead revealed the extent of the erasure this museum was invested in effecting. As an audience member attending and funding this performance, I became increasingly aware of my complicity in its mission. The performance's erasure—the museum's attempt to rewrite its history and neutralize its setting—is usefully recognized as a perversion of a black movement. While black movements are embodied actions by black people that radically imagine black futures apart from trauma, the plantation's performance is racist revisionism in the service of white supremacy. To that end, it becomes what I term an anti-black movement. The anti-black racism on display in this performance must be recognized just as forcefully as a movement—a vested interest in obscuring history to enable ongoing systemic racism. In recognizing its mission, black movements become all the more vital. O'Hara's play firmly rejects modern rewritten histories of plantations, highlighting white complicity in this retelling.

The play's scrambling of the sites of a concentration camp and a plantation, as well as its exposure of white characters' anti-black movements traversing these scrambled spaces, operates against the erasure of black oppression and resistance. O'Hara's work—like many other works of

my study—engages with and stages the trauma of suppressed histories. In attempting to periodize and better understand the function of scrambling and black movements in this work, Andrew Sofer's 2013 book, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance,* becomes useful. Sofer recognizes a group of contemporary dramatists in the United States: the new trauma playwrights. His characterization of these dramatists is prescient for prominent black drama discussion; he explains that this work marks "an emerging model of trauma as 'a past that has never been present'" (119). Borrowing his terminology from physics, Sofer's title concept, "dark matter," refers to the invisible forces at work in theatrical performance—"the 'not there' yet 'not not there'" or "felt absences" the stage creates (4). Therefore, he categorizes the work of the new trauma playwrights as an engagement with the dark matter of trauma that has never been acknowledged or made present for contemporary American society. Sofer's work complicates the function of Alexander's scrambling, as Alexander explains that scrambling helps make the obscured visible. In her place, Sofer might argue that scrambling makes the invisible felt. These various forms of recognition are central to the works of my study. I argue that dramatists like O'Hara, those with an interest in suppressed trauma, make use of the theatre's long-held interest in ghostly presence/absence in accord with the methodology of scrambling. By staging these "felt absences," the histories these ghosts make known reveal the suppressed, overwritten, and buried script of the palimpsest.

Antebellum, like *In the Continuum*, makes use of the African diaspora as a framing device; in O'Hara's hands, it functions to imply that these global connections and histories are needed to defeat revisionism erasing white, heteronormative violence and complicity. In a clear invocation of felt absences, *Antebellum* uses the Middle Passage to reject the revisionist histories at work in the time of the play and in its twenty-first century context. Again, the play itself is set

in the late 1930s, and the plantation that forms one-half of its setting is just outside Atlanta, Georgia—some 250 miles from the coast. In one of the most haunting scenes of the piece, Ariel—the white, Jewish plantation owner—must begin to face the hastily covered over horrors that have occurred on his family's land. Against his will, memories he has long suppressed force their way into his conscious mind; he explains that he has stumbled upon untold numbers of "spirits" and speaks of what seems to be a mass grave on his land: "they were the ones that did not make it to these shores . . . onto these plantations . . . across these fields . . . to the edges of this creek . . . **beneath** my hands of soil" (479, emphasis and ellipses original). It is telling that O'Hara chooses this figurative language. Clearly, those enslaved Africans who died en route to the United States would not be carried inland 250 miles to a mass grave in Atlanta. It would have been equally possible for Ariel to speak of finding the bones of the many enslaved on his own plantation—a sufficiently traumatic suppressed history, surely. However, O'Hara's choice underscores a commitment to the interconnections denoted by the diaspora. The play draws attention to the global industry of the slave trade and unites, in this haunted "resting" place, all of the African diaspora. In this moment, the recalled memory forces Ariel to recognize his complicity in the sanitization of his family home, particularly in the historical moment in which popular culture—through the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*—was most invested in romanticizing the United States' antebellum South.

The play's investment in global, diasporic connections becomes visible through the scrambled sites of the play, which are spanned by Gabriel and Edna—two black characters played by two actors, but who are, in fact, one and the same person. Before long, the audience recognizes the transatlantic passage that has so transformed Gabriel/Edna. An American cabaret performer in Berlin, Gabriel develops a relationship with Ariel. When the rise of violent

antisemitism prompts the Jewish Ariel to return to America, Gabriel hopes to accompany him. However, Gabriel unwittingly captures the interest of a Nazi Kommandant, Oskar, and is abducted to a concentration camp where he is enslaved and raped by Oskar. Eventually, the audience comes to know that Oskar has been subjecting Gabriel to hormonal experiments—the result of which are a forced transition to a feminine gender presentation. Upon release, Gabriel chooses to identify as Edna, and returns to the United States. We discover Edna when she arrives at Ariel's door, and is confronted with the reality of his wife, Sarah. Before long, Edna realizes that her own transatlantic journey has not marked a transition from slavery into freedom. Like so many of the African diaspora before her, she recognizes Ariel's home as a site of bondage. She tells Ariel, "It reminds me of my detention center. It has the same awfulness to its architecture . . . I left one death camp and have ended up in another" (474). Ariel, having only just escaped a concentration camp himself, must consider his own diaspora under assault. The play's staging encourages the characters to recognize their commonalities in this regard by "bleeding" together the spaces of the master. Like Ariel's plantation, Nazi concentration camps were constructed to look pleasant and park-like in order to deceive outsiders and inculcate a kind of docility in those trapped within. As identified above, Ariel comes to recognize these commonalities, thanks in large part to the scrambling as a black movement seen in the actions of the actors playing Gabriel/Edna.

The symbolic resonance of Gabriel/Edna's transatlantic passage expands as the play progresses. The play encourages audience members to see Edna as another apparition—another spirit of the diaspora never to be released from this place. Edna appears onstage by entering through the front door of Ariel and Sarah's plantation house and demanding water. Edna's breach of the threshold of this white space, this symbol of oppression, and her proud and entitled

claim on the space and Sarah's time, function as a black movement. Edna is an anachronism—a black woman in the 1930s in the South entering a white home through the front door (a setting to which the added symbolism of the plantation space does not go unnoticed) not as an act of angry defiance, but purely as though she would not expect anyone to take offense at such an action.[16] In this entrance, the actor portraying Edna signals the character as out of time and place—and at considerable risk in so being. Sarah makes this connection repeatedly; speaking to Ariel about Edna, she says, "She could be one of those spirits from out there in those fields for all we know" (445). Edna's radical easiness in this setting quickly leads the audience to anticipate Edna's approaching fate in this place. When Sarah discovers Edna and Ariel together and returns later—in a drunken, homophobic, racist rant of betrayal—to shoot and kill Edna, it seems an inevitable outcome. In this moment, Edna joins the felt absences of denied and suppressed trauma. She becomes one of the "millions . . . dead . . . yet to be mourned" (O'Hara 479). In this diasporic connection, O'Hara links Edna's suppressed trauma not just to the slave trade, but also to broader intersections of the 1930s and today.

By examining the intersections of Edna/Gabriel's identity, the full scope of O'Hara's intervention becomes clear. It is evident that *Antebellum* engages with diasporic global connections not merely to emphasize transnational racist ideologies across time, but also the heterosexualizing processes of particular interest in Alexander's work—as well as binaric gender normativity and fixity. *Antebellum* audience members recognize the intersecting oppressions and traumas of Edna's experience that remain "yet to be mourned" (479). Gabriel's sexuality, his interracial relationship, and Edna's transwoman identity—one thrust upon her, and deemed in

[16] The scene echoes Langston Hughes's play, *Mulatto*, written and set in the 1930s, in which a black character, Robert, enters defiantly through the front door of the plantation house in which his mother works. It is likely that O'Hara intends this resonance.

many ways, as Oskar makes clear, a "corrective" action—begin to make clear not only the palimpsestic ideologies undergirding each individual form of oppression, but also the intersections of those ideologies. These individual oppressions might be grouped under the term queerphobia. Perhaps at no other point in the play is O'Hara's engagement with intersectional oppressions as pronounced as in the "corrective" action that transforms Gabriel into Edna. Gabriel exhibits a queerness that Nazi forces cannot accept. Oskar tells Gabriel that he was chosen for hormone treatment because of his gender fluidity: "Because of your inherent feminine qualities you were thought a perfect [fit]" (453). Oskar uses dismissive rhetoric in defining the transformation, calling the forced hormonal treatment and its results merely "adjustments" (450). It is clear O'Hara intends Edna's storyline as a scrambling of the ideologies guiding Nazi medical experiments, homophobic and gender normative ideologies pervading the United States at the same time, and the ways these oppressions reemerge in shifted forms today. The Nazi doctor whose experiments clearly inspired those promoted by Oskar is Carl Värnet.

> [Värnet] claimed that he could "cure" people of their homosexuality by giving them the male sex hormone, testosterone. He tried to develop an artificial gland that was to be surgically inserted into the patients and took the opportunity to perform hormone experiments with homosexual prisoners placed at his disposal in the concentration camp, Buchenwald. (Kragh 107)

The experimenters exploiting and abusing Gabriel and others at Oskar's concentration camp are never staged, but the hormonal treatments forced on Gabriel resonate with this history. In *Antebellum*, the audience sees Oskar becoming increasingly set on accelerating Gabriel's transformation, and Oskar's motivation for this insistence gradually emerges. Oskar, who practices his English with Gabriel, tells Gabriel that he will be Oskar's "Maid" (440). Gabriel,

acting as English tutor, tells Oskar he means "Man Servant," not maid (440). Oskar rejects this correction by slapping Gabriel, insisting he means what he has said. This first exchange about Gabriel's gender begins to clarify Oskar's intentions, rooted in an investment in stereotypical gender roles and the control he exerts through those norms. Oskar must make sense of his own strong attraction to Gabriel, a sexual attraction that cannot become widely known if Oskar hopes to maintain his place within the Nazi forces. As a result, he forces feminization on Gabriel, and soon the transgender identity. The transition reaffirms, for Oskar, heteronormativity and his own heterosexuality within that cultural mandate.

The manifold barriers to Oskar's disturbing fantasy of a relationship with Gabriel/Edna are echoed in the relationship between Ariel and Gabriel/Edna. By subtly scrambling these two men, O'Hara creates a connection that demonstrates the transnational traffic of antiqueer and racist oppressions—oppressions that make both relationships not only taboo, but exploitative and damaging for Gabriel/Edna. This scrambling of Oskar and Ariel reveals the actions of both men as anti-black movements. O'Hara makes a daring move in this choice, given the severe contrast between the mutual attraction between Gabriel/Edna and Ariel and the unconscionable abuse and rape of Gabriel/Edna at Oskar's hands. Oskar's imagined ownership of Gabriel/Edna emerges in the ways he objectifies Gabriel, and this comes as no surprise to the audience. Importantly, however, the audience comes to recognize echoes of the same tendencies in Ariel. While these never appear with anything approaching equal malice, they do suggest that, even under ideal circumstances, Ariel and Gabriel/Edna would never transform this melodrama into a happy romance. Ariel's and Oskar's views of Gabriel at Club Brisk are divided by only a line—encouraging the audience to read the scrambled scenes as mutually informed—and demonstrate the similarities in their attraction. Ariel says, "You were so beautiful," and Oskar says, "You

were grand" (453). These two similar lines spoken so close together can be furthered emphasized in performance; directors and actors may choose to deliver these lines with similar tones, pauses, or lighting to help audiences recognize the perhaps unexpected parallels. As with the split stage in *In the Continuum*, Ariel and Oskar stand on opposite sides of the scrambled set of the plantation house/concentration camp as they watch Gabriel/Edna. These lines bridge the divide between the men, showing them to be more alike than certainly Ariel would choose to recognize. These initial attractions move both men to seek ownership of Gabriel's beauty. Oskar's belief in his ownership leads to his enslavement of Gabriel. Ariel's, by contrast, emerges in the fervor of his passion for Gabriel/Edna. Ariel says, "I want to open you up . . . And mark you like a book" (459). Both men want to transform Gabriel/Edna to suit their fantasies.

While these embodied moments onstage first invite audiences to recognize the scrambling of Oskar and Ariel, Ariel deepens these surface-level similarities by failing to disrupt a racist hierarchy dividing him from Gabriel/Edna. Audience members will of course expect Oskar to maintain such divisions, but Ariel's refusal to recognize common ground in the shared oppressions that endanger both Gabriel and himself in Germany is particularly striking. Ariel's own marginalized identity as a Jewish man does not—despite Gabriel's repeated insistence on their shared oppressions—eliminate the hierarchy ingrained in the very setting of their reunion. When still in Nazi Germany, Gabriel and Ariel have a lengthy fight in which Gabriel attempts to convey the severity of antisemitism and invites Ariel to recognize the ways in which Ariel's oppression in this setting relates to Gabriel's—both in Germany and the United States. Gabriel's finally states bluntly, "All I'm saying is that America was built with my people's blood and Germany hopes to **rebuild** with the blood of your people" (469, emphasis original). Ariel downplays and fails to recognize these commonalities in any meaningful way, and after Gabriel

speaks the above line, redirects the conversation to sex. Ariel repeatedly refuses to engage with his own oppression; his white privilege enables him to set it aside. When Ariel's wife, Sarah, attempts to hire Edna to work in the household as a maid, the audience recognizes that Gabriel's role as Oskar's maid would inevitably be repeated if Edna were able to live with Ariel in the American south of the 1930s. Ariel's refusal to engage with these realities and disrupt the racist hierarchy once back in the United States, then, confirms his scrambling with Oskar. His failure acts as an anti-black movement—racist inaction that leaves Gabriel vulnerable in Germany once Ariel eventually flees and Edna vulnerable back in the United States.

The scrambling of racist ideologies is compounded by the play's effort to scramble the ideologies of Nazi queerphobia and American queerphobia. O'Hara folds in another layer of oppression for the modern audience, recalling current violence against transpeople, particularly transwomen of color. O'Hara chooses to divide Gabriel/Edna into two separate roles for two separate actors. While Nazi hormone treatments certainly are a documentable part of history, man-to-woman transitions were not Värnet's goal. This shift begs the question of intention. The primary intervention of *Antebellum* inarguably is its scrambling of 1930s Germany and antebellum/1930s United States to demonstrate the traffic in racial oppression between them. Nevertheless, by presenting a transwoman whose transition is so actualized that Ariel fails to recognize her, the play cannot escape resonances with the violent queer/transphobia of our current moment. Importantly, O'Hara does not place the ultimate blame for Edna's murder in Ariel's hands, as audience members might initially expect. Rather, Ariel's wife, Sarah, shoots and kills Edna in a drunken rage.

O'Hara's choice positions Sarah as a scrambled, palimpsestic character. Sarah's action in taking out her husband's betrayal on Edna's body likely surprises many audiences because Sarah

has been portrayed as "simple," docile, and harmless. This violent turn led some reviewers to dismiss the ending as a misstep. A reviewer of the Cleveland Public Theatre production in 2012 wrote, "The play concludes as if the playwright painted himself into a corner with no reasonable way out" (Abelman). Certainly, the ending's melodramatic violence may not be to some audiences' taste, but I would not present it as a misstep. Rather, it reads as an intentional choice to center and amplify the violence done by complicit and/or actively violent white women—a demographic continually given a pass in discussions of racist violence. Sarah's abrupt turn to murder shocks audiences, prompting them to question what such uncharacteristic violence might signify. Sarah, portrayed by a white actor, becomes a vehicle for scrambling as an anti-black movement in this moment. Her actions become a forceful rejection of the erasure effected in the Oak Alley plantation tour discussed earlier; unlike my tour guide, Sarah is not allowed to remain a neutral character in antebellum dress. Three histories of white women's complicity converge beneath this embodied act—the sum of which forms an indictment of white women's failure to place race and queerness on an equal plane with cisgender issues in their own efforts to obtain human rights. First, this movement recalls the plantation owner's wife finding excuses to whip a house slave as revenge for her husband's rape of the slave; second, it recalls the white woman's complicity or active participation in 1930s lynchings at the most minor of perceived slights; and third, it recalls contemporary white feminism's failure to acknowledge the extent of transphobia and its disproportionate effect on transwomen of color. In Sarah's choice to lynch Edna, the ongoing gulf in understanding—the lack of intersectionality in current iterations of white feminist engagement—is repeated. This violent, embodied action forces all these scrambled histories to the foreground, making each visible and demonstrating their interconnectedness. Witnessing this anti-black movement, white women audience members are asked to

acknowledge and reckon with their ideologies—particularly those they might have presented as progressive.

Conclusion

These two plays begin to demonstrate the breadth of contemporary black drama in the United States and its engagement with transnational feminisms. By examining the function of these plays' scrambled geographic spaces and times, the transnational traffic of oppressive ideologies gains clarity, further revealing the importance of intersectionality and many interconnected points of focus for work that I am pulling under the heading of African diasporic performance. Both plays employ the African diaspora as a frame through which to view the scrambled stories they tell. In *In the Continuum,* Gurira and Salter use the diaspora as a stretched web through which to view global AIDS crisis—the particular statistical vulnerability of black women—as always-already scrambled, mutually invested. *Antebellum* uses the primary force creating the diaspora—the international slave trade—as a layer of palimpsestic, obscured history to reveal the full and ongoing violence of white ideologies. To this, O'Hara adds another palimpsestic layer of the white supremacy guiding the Holocaust by bringing the violent erasure of plantation histories into view and aligning them with concentration camps. And finally, he uses his frame to examine the intersections of racism and queerphobia. The embodied actions—the black and anti-black movements—through which this scrambling is accomplished deserve to be understood, I argue, as modes marking African diasporic performance. The vision of African diasporic performance that emerges from the playwrights of my larger study aligns black movements with a deeply intersectional political consciousness—one that reveals diasporic connections and disrupts temporalities to radically imagine alternatives of freedom movements that span geographic borders and that dare to tell histories in full.

Chapter Four:

Neoimperialism in Contemporary Black Drama: Examining Katori Hall's *Hurt Village* and Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*

The diasporic influences affecting the form and content of the previous plays in this study remain relevant in Katori Hall's *Hurt Village* (2012) and Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* (2017). These complex works maintain a diasporic, global consciousness by exposing the dangers of neoimperialism and the United States' role as a world neoimperial power. Through their transnational feminist scrambling, Hall and Nottage examine a range of ostensibly national issues and reveal them to be imbricated in the larger system of the United States' neoimperial project of globalization and late capital. Through her tale of the last days of the infamous Memphis housing project, Hurt Village, Hall investigates militarization, the plight of the disposable black soldier in America, and gentrification. However, she positions these concerns in a global context through references to slavery and the ongoing effort to crawl out from under its lasting impacts, placing Ghana's Door of No Return against the projects as houses of sorrow. Nottage's work similarly reveals the impacts of neoliberalism and capitalism on the home front through examining the anti-labor practices enabled and emboldened by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The disenfranchised working class of Reading, Pennsylvania, enters a global conversation in examining free trade in North America and in the diasporic connections of the laborer of color throughout American history. As indicated through these brief overviews, Hall and Nottage employ scrambling through their points of emphasis in the worlds they create; this engagement lends itself to my reading through Alexander's methodology of scrambling. However, as in the previous chapter, I also extend Alexander's scrambling through my understanding of this methodology as a form of Soyica Diggs Colbert's black movements.

Through both the playwrights' created worlds and productions' embodied actions onstage, these two plays confront the local impacts of globalization and the United States' neoimperial policies. This work aligns with and advances transnational feminist theory and activism.

Transnational Feminism and the American Neoimperial Project

In order to understand the transnational feminist scrambling Nottage and Hall effect through these two works, a briefing on the theoretical conversation surrounding American neoimperialism and its local impacts is useful. The paramount concerns for this chapter are the soldier's role in the militarization of the neoimperial project, the worker's role in globalization under free trade, and the underclasses formed by the discarding of soldiers and workers and the concomitant formation of the felon class. For each of these concerns, it is necessary to trace the ways in which these larger projects affect those with marginalized identities (both within and outside the United States). As discussed in the introduction, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's research—which she calls "anticapitalist feminism"—reveals the exploitation of late capitalism and globalization and its disproportionate impacts on marginalized identities, saying, "Anticapitalist feminism links capitalism as an economic system and culture of consumption centrally to racist, sexist, heterosexist, and nationalist relations of rule in the production of capitalist/corporate citizenship" (183). The extensive and careful intersectionality present in her research finds similar expression in the works of Hall and Nottage.

In her 2011 article, "Imperial Democracies, Militarised Zones, Feminist Engagements," Mohanty, who works and lives in the United States, urges feminist scholars of similar positionality to turn their attention to the neoimperialism of the United States in a post-9/11 era. She argues that the "global formation and operation of securitised states, anchored within the rhetoric of protectionism and the war on terror, and accompanied by militarised, neoliberal

corporate ambitions, is a phenomenon that deserves critical feminist attention" (77). While she remains committed to researching the impacts of this rhetoric and its very real intervention outside of the United States, she takes special interest in this piece to examine the effects of this rhetoric on American citizens. In order to preserve the corporate interests benefitting most from an increased demand on security and the fear of the threat of global terror, Mohanty finds that this rhetoric functions to subdue and control would-be dissidents. Drawing on Teresa Brennan's concept of the "bio-deregulation of the body" under neoliberal globalization, Mohanty posits a "bio-militarisation of the body." The bodies made vulnerable are, she explains, "never generic ones," highlighting "indigenous, immigrant, Muslim, raced, classed, and gender-marked bodies" as those most targeted through bio-militarized (78). Mohanty explains the psychological impacts of the system under securitized regimes: "A bio-militarised body is one that must survive under conditions of perpetual control and surveillance, is subject to the constant material and symbolic violence enacted by the state, and lives in constant fear of being arrested or incarcerated" (78). This threat of arrest corresponds to the dispossession and civil rights violations widely understood to be part of the vastly expanded felon class in the United States. Further, Mohanty's research reveals a false binary—the participant aiding the securitized state, such as the soldier, or the dissident living under threat of incarceration.

The soldier/dissident binary Mohanty reveals in her research finds further support in the work of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow.* Interestingly, the very rhetoric used to gain support for policies that created a massive felon class leaned heavily upon the soldier/dissident binary. Alexander's study argues that the "new Jim Crow" of her title—the expanding felon class—stems from the "War on Drugs" advocated strongly under the Reagan administration as a response to the crack epidemic disproportionately affecting communities of color—a response

studiously ignoring the similar impact cocaine had on whiter, more affluent communities. Alexander explains, "Numerous paths were available to us, as a nation, in the wake of the crack crisis, yet for reasons traceable largely to racial politics and fear mongering we chose war. Conservatives found they could finally justify an all-out war on an 'enemy' that had been racially defined years before" (52). What is most significant for this study, and in relation to Mohanty's own findings, is the framing of the response to the crack epidemic as "war." By framing the increased militarization of the police forces within the United States through branding their dictated focus a "war," the means of population control and suppression within and outside the nation's borders creates opportunities to recognize transnational shared interests for oppressed parties. As I will show, Hall brings these common harms into view as she explores this rhetorical binary and its effects in *Hurt Village*.[17]

Lynn Nottage's intervention takes a related, but different form. Like *Hurt Village*, *Sweat* exposes the growing felon class, but rather than demonstrating its growth in relation to militarization in a post-9/11 era, she connects it to globalization and neoimperialism through revealing the effects of NAFTA on the labor force in the United States. While the transnational feminist theory of M. Jacqui Alexander discussed in previous chapters calls for workers across North American borders to recognize their commonality and become visible to one another, Nottage's work adopts a similar goal through a national focus: to highlight the fissures and racial tensions within the labor force of the United States. Norman Caulfield's 2009 analysis of NAFTA explains the power dynamics reinforced through the free trade policy: "This new international division of labor has tilted power in the workplace heavily toward the transnationals

[17] In so doing, Hall enters a long lineage of black dramatists who use their craft to critique American demands on and subsequent disposals of black soldiers. Katie Egging's 2010 dissertation, *Home Front as Warfront: African American World War I Drama*, examines black dramatists' responses to similar treatment of soldiers following WWI. See especially Chapter Three (pp. 110-157) on works by May Miller and Langston Hughes.

[i.e. multinational company heads and trustees] as they pit workers against one another [. . .] Its impact has been felt the most in collective bargaining as employers engaged in this process are increasingly successful in rolling back the hard-won gains made by workers in earlier periods" (5). Nottage takes interest in NAFTA's devastating effect on unions' negotiating capacities, and the ways the material impacts of that reduced capacity evoke anger that is frequently misdirected. In the absence of the vague forces of, as Caulfield terms it, "the transnationals"—or, again, the multinational company heads and trustees—some workers' anger stemming from reduced pay and opportunities finds targets in black and Hispanic/Latinx laborers.[18] Mohanty connects NAFTA funding to the antiimmigrant sentiment feeding the call for a U.S./Mexico border wall. She explains, "The US Secure Fence Act of 2006 gave the DHS [Department of Homeland Security] unilateral power to waive 36 federal laws at the Texas-Mexico [border], and in collaboration with [NAFTA] partners, begin building a Berlin-style, concrete mega-security wall" (82). The election of Donald Trump depended in no small part on his campaign's promise to further that goal. While Mohanty takes direct interest in the wall and its surrounding rhetoric's effect on Mexican culture and environment, Nottage homes in on antiimmigrant rhetoric and its messy, racist application within the United States. Nottage is interested in the ways in which this rhetoric becomes another means of growing the felon class, further dissipating the powers of the working class.

***Hurt Village*: Militarization and Gentrification**

[18] Donald Trump's own objections to NAFTA have led to a new agreement, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which is under consideration in Congress at the time of this writing. The new agreement does not appear to substantially alter the issues Caulfield raises. It includes labor provisions that specify that "40 to 45 percent of automobile parts have to be made by workers who earn at least $16 an hour by 2023" (Kirby). However, it remains to be seen if such requirements would stem the tide of outsourcing Nottage's play describes.

Despite the important contributions of *Hurt Village* and *Sweat*, the scholarly conversation surrounding these two plays is in its nascent stage. For *Sweat*, this fact follows naturally from its quite recent debut. Lynn Nottage commands a good deal of scholarly interest, and many prominent scholars have doubtless already begun to turn their attention to this latest contribution. For *Hurt Village*, the silence is less explicable. Katori Hall's works have been widely read and performed, yet only her 2009 *The Mountaintop* has garnered full scholarly attention. Through a brief examination of the critiques emerging from this small body of scholarship, when placed in conversation with the somewhat negative reviews of *Hurt Village* in the most prominent newspapers, an explanation for Hall's marginalized attention begins to emerge. Her overt political engagement, particularly her feminism (which has been perceived as contradictory with her commitment to antiracism), has led critics and scholars alike to minimize her work. By contrast, it is her detailed and extensive engagement with the concerns of transnational and intersectional feminism that makes her work integral to my study.

As discussed in the introduction to this study, Paul Carter Harrison summarily dismisses Hall's *Mountaintop,* which he calls a "misadventure on Broadway which was an unconscionable demystification of the Martin Luther King legacy" ("Toward a Critical Vocabulary"). Ishmael Reed echoes Harrison's distaste in an article taking aim at what he terms "a thirty-two-year assault" on black male writers. He writes, "Although the fact that Mr. King Jr. had mistresses is something new and shocking to Ms. Hall, it has been well known since the 1960s. What made this Broadway play so repulsive was that it opened on the weekend of the unveiling of Martin Luther King Jr.'s statue. As proof of the billions being made by shaming black men, *Mountaintop* grossed over three million dollars!" (72). In their concern over the perceived slights to King's legacy, these writer-scholars fail to see the conversation Hall enters with this piece,

even dismissing her work—as Harrison does—as a form of theatre he disregards: social realism. By contrast, Soyica Diggs Colbert's excellent reading of the work in *South Atlantic Quarterly* recognizes Hall as rep-and-rev(ing) on a Suzan-Lori Parks vein of history plays: she "recalibrate[s] the movement he personifies, shifting the emphasis on King as the singular embodiment of the civil rights movement [. . .] creat[ing] space on stage for another character to participate in crafting the play and therefore analogously rais[ing] the question of how humanizing King provides room within the history of the civil rights movement to tell women's stories" (262). While those critical of her work seem to disparage it for rating feminism over race, doing so fundamentally misunderstands the aims of transnational and intersectional feminism, particularly in the hands of women of color.

The lessons learned in the burgeoning conversation surrounding *Mountaintop* resonate in the tepid reviews of *Hurt Village*. In their reviews of the 2012 Signature Theatre production, Ben Brantley for the *New York Times* and David Sheward for the *NY Review* each take issue with the play's overt politicism and its means of conveying it. Brantley critiques the play for dialogue that "doesn't always come naturally" and its reliance on "heavy symbolic resonance." Sheward similarly finds the work heavy-handed, saying, "[I]t seems more like a political statement than a slice of real life." While I concede that the ambitious scope of the work can create confusion for audiences attempting to keep all plot lines clear, what is interesting about these two reviews is their insistence on the play as failed realism, when it pretends to be nothing of the kind. Brantley does recognize some Brechtian elements in the work but finds this resonance outdated—"creak[y]" in fact.

Hall's understanding of her process and goals provides useful insight into the form and content of her work. For an author subject to much criticism of her antiracism and her

understanding of her own blackness, it is little wonder interviewers have introduced the subject. In an interview for the NEA Art Works Blog, Paulette Beete asks Hall about her identities and their impact on her work. Hall's answer is telling. On being a woman and a woman of color, she says, "[T]hose two parts of my identity are so inextricably linked that they inform one another," and to these two, she adds region: her identity as a Southerner. Her emphasis on region as an identity marker and creative fount is clear: "I will say most of my plays start from place. I always say that I'm a writer who writes more from place than race. Setting is just super important." To be attuned to place or setting, Hall reveals her primary concern of context, of historicizing, and it is doubtless this focus on setting that drives her to craft a work that frames her characters as full, visibly intersectional people. It is through this focus on place that *Hurt Village* scrambles the local and particular—this waning housing project—with the global and systemic—militarization and gentrification.

Black Movements in *Hurt Village*

Hall's play performs black movements via her scrambled sense of place. Colbert defines her term: "*Black movements* are embodied actions (a change in position, place, posture, or orientation) that draw from the imagination and the past to advance political projects" (5, emphasis original). I contend that Colbert's theory of black movements lends the theory of scrambling a framework to analyze performance, and further that the theory of scrambling lends black movements a broader applicability among transnational feminist scholarship, thus bringing the grounded political/activist import of Colbert's theory to the fore of an international conversation. Colbert's description of her theory both resonates with the mechanics of scrambling and its grander vision: "Post-civil rights artists make use of the temporal specificity of performing blackness by crafting webs of affiliation, which offer contexts for rethinking

blackness in the past, present, and future" (6). *Hurt Village* crafts those webs of affiliation via set design and language.

Hall's description of the set challenges set designers to create a space that is at once specific to Memphis during the final days of the Hurt Village housing project, while also evoking a warzone. The particularities of Memphis are clear: "*A crooked, dinted, weather-beaten sign that says 'Hurt Village' sways in the wind* [. . .] *The faint outline of the Memphis Arena Pyramid glistens into existence in the distance*" (5). However, Hall's directions extend far beyond the expected wear and tear on a housing project, even a notoriously poorly-maintained one days from being demolished. She calls it a "*modern-day wasteland* [with s]*hattered windows*" and adds, "*It looks as if a wrecking ball has already slammed through the sides, exposing the units*" (5). The wrecking ball choice carries function by enabling audiences to view action within the units, but the choice is more than practical. Hall calls for a set that would be equally at home in, say, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*; she imagines a set that recalls a warzone of twisted metal and broken brick, and places within it action that scrambles wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the War on Drugs at home on the Memphis streets. Through these negative webs of affiliation, Hall's play asserts that the wars being waged overseas are revisited at home on the populations that make those wars possible—both through the trauma of combat and through the subsequent disposability of the soldier, especially the soldier of color. My term here, disposable soldier, attempts to convey the mistreatment of veterans as evidenced by inadequate access to health care and other benefits and increased risk of suicide.[19] The

[19] Data from 2016 reveals that veterans commit suicide at 1.5 times the rate of Americans who have never served. These numbers are especially dire for veterans aged 18 to 34, whose suicide rate has increased 10% from 2006 to 2016 (Shane, "VA: Suicide Rate"). Despite these numbers, ongoing staffing shortages at the VA lead to delayed medical care, and a focus on mental health remains poor (Shane, "Report: Vets Still Face"). The combination of these failures may lead veterans to feel that they have indeed been deemed "disposable" once returned from deployment.

vulnerability of veterans intersects with racism to make particularly vulnerable veterans of color, a vulnerability amplified further by Hall's Buggy, a black veteran returning home to the notoriously underserved community of the Hurt Village housing projects. Hall's set mounts a sophisticated critique by merging the disposable soldier of color with institutional racism of other kinds. The scrambled set demonstrates the particular vulnerability of a soldier like Buggy, who may—once disposed—fall victim to domestic War on Drugs because he has no other income (or PTSD treatment) available. As I will show further in the broader scrambling in Hall's work discussed below, Hall's dictated set encourages the audience to understand the interdependent nature of foreign and domestic wars of militarization and gentrification in a neoliberal nation.

The set design itself may be a static symbol of scrambling, but the majority of the characters' movement through it—particularly those of Buggy—becomes what I will term "inverted black movements" because they reveal the impossibility of successfully negotiating these intertwined systems. This failure inverts Colbert's intended function of black movements, which are designed to offer liberatory futures that cannot be imagined in the status quo. Rather, via these negative webs of affiliation, Hall demonstrates the need for such a radical reimagining of current systems. I argue that this work should be understood in relation to black movements because it employs the same embodied movement and the same use of scrambling, and it ultimately presents a related call—a mission in tandem with black movements as Colbert intends them. It differs in that rather than supplying the positive future, it reveals the current reality that so demands such change. In practice, however, the staging and process of observing a black movement versus an inverted black movement are identical. Thus, no shift in audience

preparedness is required; the movements in context are designed to pull audiences through to the playwrights' intended conclusion.

While inverted black movements become clear in set design negotiation, Hall's use of language functions as black movements that align more closely with the letter of Colbert's theory. *Hurt Village* features an all-black cast and, through her use of language, Hall invites a grand black lineage. The characters' speech grounds itself in the particulars of Memphis while recalling the African diaspora and a storied black history within the United States—a form of scrambling that evokes Colbert's webs of affiliation. Even Hall's language to describe her process for the play recalls this history; she says that as a Memphis native, she learned the language of her characters "by osmosis" because it "sits in your ear and becomes part of your blood memory" (qtd. in Chai). This blood memory evokes the long spiritual connection of the African diaspora that becomes a means of social and political union among black people of many backgrounds. Kimberly Ellis's insightful review of the Signature Theatre production establishes a sense of the lineage Hall continues through the language of the play; she compares Hall's command of language to Zora Neale Hurston's "language of the 'folk,'" especially in the scene she names a "ring shout," wherein characters engage in a public diss battle of Yo Momma jokes. Ellis's placement of the ring shout within the American folk tradition prevalent in Hurston's work is certainly accurate, but as the abundant scholarship surrounding Hurston's work has shown, the folk traditions she catalogued and injected into her own literature have clear ties to African culture carried to the United States during the Middle Passage. This diasporic, signifying performance echoes Colbert's claims about the function of signifying via ritual in Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*: that the staging of ritual "places the body, place, and time on the move in order to extend the life of black performance" (263). A ritual that is at once

fundamentally situated in its current place—the Hurt Village housing project—and just as fundamentally situated in a much more amorphous diasporic tradition—reinforces the scrambled duality of Hall's setting. That she does so through this distinct evocation of blackness recalls the broader trend traced in this study; these playwrights often evoke—or indeed invoke—existing connections of the African diaspora in a way that, yes, extends the life of black performance, and also seems to offer up the existing framework of the diaspora for cross-cultural connection as a means to radically imagine broader global connections across shared oppressions. Through their scrambling, these playwrights' black movements disrupt the linearity of time and the fixed geography of space to extend black performance beyond neat and fixed divisions of past, present, and future. As Colbert describes it, "black performance disrupts the static materiality of objects [. . .] render[ing] the black theatrical body flexible and therefore radically alters conceptions of bodies and places" (263). As the next section will further show, in *Hurt Village*, this scrambling brings the local impact of the United States' global neoimperalism into view, enacting a chain of recognition that would remain otherwise obscured.

Scrambling Local/International in *Hurt Village*

As with the works in the previous chapter, the scrambling in both Hall's and Nottage's plays is best understood when explored through both its theoretical/historical expression and through scrambling as understood as a theatrical black movement. I now turn to its theoretical/historical expression. While previous chapters in this study have explored works that scramble local and international sites, *Hurt Village* and *Sweat* stand out as works seeking to illuminate the local effects of United States' neoimperialism. *Hurt Village* accomplishes this end by employing a local site—the Hurt Village housing projects in Memphis—to show the full through-threads of neoimperialism, foregrounding the United States as a neoimperial power

committed to increased militarization. A key web of affiliation relevant to the success of Hall's scrambling is the understanding of a shared oppression among folks of different nations subject to neoimperial influence. Hall establishes that connection in many ways, including through the framework of the African diaspora. If audiences fail to recognize shared cultural practices like the ring shout discussed above as diasporic, Hall makes the connection explicit. Buggy, the returning soldier, tells his daughter Cookie of his wide travels, including to Ghana's Door of No Return. He recalls feeling the smooth scrapes in the stone of the walls, scratched there by enslaved Africans attempting to escape before they could be loaded onto ships to cross the Atlantic. He tells Cookie, "That's where it all started. Been trying to claw our way out ever since" (77). By connecting the resistance of the newly enslaved to that of black citizens of the twenty-first century United States, Hall asserts a legacy of oppression that must be kept in view in order to fully understand the challenges facing the oppressed in the United States today. *Hurt Village*, then, does invite connection to the African diaspora. This connection is noteworthy in part because it answers some of the criticisms of Reed and Harrison who have chosen to reject Hall's work from a growing canon that Harrison calls "African Diasporic Performance" ("Black Theatre" 136). However, as I will show, the spiritual unity effected through the diaspora gains a materialist frame in this work—a framework often missing in Harrison's current discussions of African diasporic performance. In Hall's hands, diaspora becomes a means of broad recognition fueling a sociopolitical call to action to unify against ongoing means of oppression exposed throughout *Hurt Village*. Through her references to the slave trade and her ongoing evidence of the shared cultural connections of the diaspora, Hall creates a global network that she can connect to the current systems of global oppression, which she reveals as the United States' neoimperialism through militarization and mass incarceration.

Hall writes the setting as "The Second Bush Dynasty." Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are underway, and Hall's use of "dynasty" indicates both concern with the biological lineage often marking American presidents and, more centrally, antidemocratic values in pursuing wars against the interests of the American people. When Cookie's father, Buggy, returns from his tour of duty, the audience learns he has been in a Muslim majority country, although the specific country is not named. This frame of global war colors Cookie's language and interpretation of her own warzone: the impoverished and often violent housing project Hurt Village in its last days. The project was demolished in 2002 to make way for, as one character puts it, "'mix income' 'partments they sayin'. Hurt Village gone be turnt to Uptown Condos" (17). Cookie, a thirteen-year-old aspiring rapper who directly addresses the audience, opens the play with a lyric, repeating, "This be the war" (6). These lines describe Hurt Village and its inhabitants' efforts to survive and prosper, but its prominence suggests Hall draws connections between the socioeconomic realities of Hurt Village and the broader militarization of the United States that touches its inhabitants in multiple ways. This frame marks the first indication in the play that Hall is invested in exposing the local impacts of the neoimperial project of the United States, and the language will be consistent. The play closes with the same lyric that opens it. Hall interprets the impacts of neoimperialism in multiple ways, including the disposable soldier of color, the country's disregard for those in poverty in an age of gentrification, and the War on Drugs—which she suggests is an extension of global conflicts.

In the character of Buggy, Hall reveals the ideology informing neoimperialism, exposing it for its dangers to the victims of war overseas and in the United States. In Buggy's boasting, he seems to have high ideas of his service, initially refusing to deal drugs on his return, saying, "I'm the protector of the United States" (18). Buggy's understanding of his service as honorable is

sensible enough, but the ideology informing that understanding swiftly draws its honor into question. As discussed in the introduction of this study, Mohanty urges Americans to confront an ongoing colonialist fantasy: that the West can and should save brown women from brown men. Buggy's friend Cornbread reveals the power of this ideology when he says, "Poppin' them Muslim maniacs in they head [. . .] you went over there to free that country. That some brave-ass shit. And I bet you can get pussy easy with that uniform" (18). Cornbread's praise indicates the pervasiveness of anti-Islam sentiments in the United States and the ways those feelings can be stoked to support war. Although he speaks perhaps directly of Islamist extremism, his words are complicated by the insistence that U.S. involvement will "free" the country—but the vagueness of the details about Buggy's service and the blanket nature of his assessment suggests that the characters have accepted a dogma, more than a specific mission. Furthermore, Cornbread's quick addition of a message of sexual attractiveness has multiple implications. Certainly, he refers to Buggy's ability to continue to attract women now that he has returned, but in proximity with the promise to free the country, it also suggests that—as Mohanty has indicated—the brown women saved from brown men will be especially grateful. The promise of Middle Eastern women as the spoils of war is clearly implied—and Buggy's investment in this promise will soon reveal itself.

The audience learns that while Buggy might attempt to uphold his vision of himself as the nation's "protector," his country is less eager to laud him. Buggy has severe PTSD. He takes norpramin and paxil (35) and is haunted by having seen a friend die in front of him—a victim of an explosion (36). While Cookie registers his illness right away, her mother and grandmother are confronting their own challenges in supporting the family, and they are eager for Buggy to help out with his military pay. When these funds are not forthcoming, Big Mama quickly discerns the

truth: “Don’t no military check come in the mail for folk like him. I done seen this down at the V.A. Call it ‘other than honorable discharge.’ Call it ‘niggah crazy.’ I’m old enough to know betta. America ain’t shit” (41). Big Mama states that she should not have expected any more from her country, and in so doing, recalls another long tradition of black folks in America. From the Revolutionary War on, African-American soldiers have consistently been asked to fight for their country, each time under promise of gaining some respect and social mobility from the effort—a promise perpetually rescinded. Through this further evidence of justice denied, Hall reveals the disposability of the black soldier in the United States. As Big Mama puts it, “that’s how they do our boys. They use ‘em for what they need, then throw ‘em away when they done. Like a man fuckin’ a hoe for free” (46).

Hall risks sacrificing this message with her complete characterization of Buggy because she reveals war crimes he has committed. In line with the criticism she received for demystifying Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy, her choice to give her wronged black soldier his own crimes might undermine her larger statement about the disposable black soldier in America. Certainly, the crimes he begins to confess to are deeply disturbing. Under the influence of his PTSD, his grip on reality begins to slip and he begins a stream of consciousness in which—if his words are to be believed—he admits to raping women with beer bottles while overseas (62). Because Hall endows her characters with broader symbolic significance, it is important to draw clear boundaries here. Certainly, Hall does not intend to suggest that all United States soldiers are guilty of sexual assault or other war crimes. Nonetheless, she invests in a trenchant critique of the western savior narrative. As suggested earlier in Buggy’s conversation with Cornbread, the promise of saving brown women from brown men serves only to position those women as the spoils of war. Rather than allowing this fantasy to stand—allowing the neoimperial project to

continue to position its participants as the "good guys"—Hall takes a risk. Importantly, Hall does not provide direct evidence that these atrocities are the reason for Buggy's "less than honorable" discharge; rather, per Mama's speech, it seems the stated reason is his mental instability. Instead, then, the atrocities in which he engaged are presented more as the business of war as usual. At the very least, if Buggy's possible sexual assault was known, it was covered up. The impact of this sexual assault on the women victimized by it is outside of the scope of Hall's text; she remains invested in revealing the impacts of the neoimperial project within the United States.[20] In showing a possible abuser's PTSD and his subsequent dismissal by the forces that enabled and concealed his abuse, Hall lends the business of the neoimperial project a further cast of corruption. Buggy is no innocent, but he is shown as grist for the mill.

Buggy's story becomes Hall's means to connect—to scramble—the militarization of the neoimperial project to mass incarceration. While he will never be tried for his crimes overseas, the America he returns to remains poised to criminalize him. Without a military paycheck, and given the severity of his illness, Buggy soon returns to drug production and distribution to support himself and his family. His partner, Cornbread, reveals he too has little choice in the matter. Cornbread has attempted a legal career. He obtains a job with Fedex—his best bet because they are the only ones, Cornbread says, "hirin' niggahs wit' a charge" (17). However, his pay is minimum wage ($5.25), so he must also continue his main job—drug dealing—"on the 'plantation'" even after his release (17). Hall's choice to involve these characters in the drug trade primes the audience to fear their ultimate outcomes. Hall presents two possible options: they might be killed in a turf war with the likes of Tony C., a rival dealer with a proven history

[20] The extent of Buggy's guilt can be impacted by director and actor choices in performance. While Buggy's attitudes toward and treatment of the women in the play does not read as threatening on the page, a director interested in emphasizing this critique could work with an actor to make Buggy's behavior slightly menacing.

of violence, or they might be sent back to prison—growing the felon class and permanently removing any chance for legal careers and social mobility.

To highlight the injustice of mass incarceration and the inequitable economic opportunities that drive the underemployed into the drug trade, Hall scrambles the drug trade and the mainstream economy of late capitalism. Hall titles Act II, Scene 8 "The Bank of America" (62). The brief scene features Buggy offering Big Mama a roll of cash from his new crack sales. Hall's title likens the industry of drug dealing to the banking industry—a connection particularly damning from her 2012 perspective looking back on the unethical lending practices of the 2000s that lead to the mortgage crisis and depression of 2008. This connection between the industry of Hurt Village and the unethical capitalism of real estate practices in the United States continues throughout the text. Tony C. deems himself the king of his slice of Memphis, asserting repeatedly, "THIS IS PRIME MUTHAFUCKIN' REAL ESTATE" (66). Tony refers to his own turf war, attempting to sustain his claim to deal drugs within Hurt Village and its surrounding blocks. However, through the partially demolished set and the frequent mentions of the characters' imminent displacement, Hall keeps the audience aware that Hurt Village is in its final days because of the broader move towards gentrification. Tony C.'s claims function as dramatic irony; the audience recognizes that his turf war among fellow drug kingpins is futile—unable to compete with the larger forces of gentrification and capitalism that are in the process of displacing him. Hall's connection of the economics of gentrification to the drug trade challenges audiences' understanding of the boundaries of legality/illegality and justice/injustice. Furthermore, the hierarchy she creates through this dramatic irony makes clear that the illegality that has captured so much of the United States' attention and money—the War on Drugs—has

successfully distracted citizens—audience members—from their own complicity in the displacement of black families and mass incarceration of people of color.

Sweat: Mass Incarceration and Globalization

While Hall accomplishes her end through examining the neoimperial project of militarization and gentrification, *Sweat* exposes the economic inequalities worsened by the deindustrialization of the United States and argues that the working class's objections are oftentimes subdued through misdirection that grows the felon class. In an interview with Holly Derr for the theatre website HowlRound, Nottage explains the broader observations about the United States she sought to reveal:

> So instead of placing the blame on those who are really responsible, the greedy corporate interests, we tend to cannibalize each other. We say "it's your fault, person of color, for coming in and taking our jobs" rather than really examining what's happening on a larger and broader scale, which is that the companies are making decisions to move the factories to a right-to-work state, or out of the country so that they can exploit workers in different ways.

Nottage examines the local effects of globalization through her focus on NAFTA. Drawing primarily on interviews conducted among former and current factory workers in Reading, Pennsylvania, Nottage constructs a play following the deindustrialization of that city. The action follows the workers' reactions to the movement of factories from the United States to Mexico—a move enabled by NAFTA.

The emerging scholarly conversation on Nottage's newest play takes an interest primarily in Nottage's creative process and the form of the work. In a *Theatre Journal* article, coauthors Courtney Elkin Mohler, Christina McMahon, and David Román reference the play's debut

production as part of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which commissioned it. Román positions the work as realism, calling it an "old-fashioned play [which . . .] promotes this sense of realist authenticity [and] echoes the bar plays of Eugene O'Neill and William Saroyan, where a range of characters share their points of view and experience the bar as an alternative home" (91). Mohler, by contrast, evokes the Brechtian elements so often associated with Nottage's work—particularly *Ruined*, which began as a retelling of Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Mohler observes the projected titles used in the OSF production, and also in the Broadway production that I saw: "In a style normally associated with docudrama, the design relied upon crisp projections of text to communicate the time and setting for each scene. Timely broadcast-news clips were also used to transition between scenes" (80). Mohler interprets their usage as an intentional departure from the realism Román notes, saying, "With a nod toward Brecht's A-effect, these scene changes disrupted the emotional power of the realistic aspects of Nottage's storytelling and contextualized them within their specific sociopolitical moments" (80). In line with Mohler's findings, popular criticism seeks primarily to situate the work in the world into which it has arrived. While the play is set in 2000 and 2008 alternately, its emergence during Donald Trump's presidency and the nationalist rhetoric guiding renewed insistence on border walls and travel bans endows the play with a particular timeliness. Michael Schulman's *New York Times* review title calls the work "The First Theatrical Landmark of the Trump Era." Schulman quotes Nottage: "One of the mantras I heard the steelworkers repeat over and over again was 'We invested so many years in this factory, and they don't see us. We're invisible.'" Nottage builds this perception of disenfranchisement into the work itself, and Schulman sees in it the frustrations that led to Donald Trump's election. Schulman's and Mohler's assertions ring true, but no detailed scholarly reading of the play yet exists. Mohler's argument that the A-effect of

the projected screens forces the audience to recognize the sociopolitical moment of the play aligns with my own findings, as does Schulman's claim that the play draws the current sociopolitical moment into finer clarity. I argue that Nottage's mode of presentation scrambles three time periods—2000, 2008, and the time period of the live performance—in order to highlight intersections of race and class, seeking to make visible the effects of the American neoimperial project on the home front.

Scrambling in *Sweat*

In discussing her prevailing impressions while researching the play, Nottage foregrounds the overlapping perception of disenfranchisement across class and race. Of her interviewees in Reading, Nottage says, "These were people who felt helpless, who felt like the American dream that they had so deeply invested in had been suddenly ripped away. I was sitting with these white men, and I thought, You sound like people of color in America" (qtd. in Schulman). Nottage begins, then, with what she positions as a shared dream deferred, and aims to make these denied groups visible to one another. To reveal their grounds for collective action, Nottage frames her work as a mystery that becomes a tragedy. The play opens in 2008 in a parole officer's office. On a split stage, both sides are the officer's office, but one side presents his meeting with Jason and the other his meeting with Chris. Both characters have recently been released from prison. Jason, a white man, has a face covered in white supremacist tattoos. As the play flashes back to 2000, the audience soon learns that Jason and Chris, a black man, were once close friends and coworkers. The split stage signals the violent break between the two former friends, and symbolizes the divisions in America Nottage seeks to question, even as the two are shown in parallel circumstances—their obvious commonalities evident, if perhaps surprising. As in the prior chapter's discussion of *In the Continuum*, the use of the split stage functions to present

these two men's lives as deeply intertwined despite their differences. The play opens with a central mystery: how did these two men get here? What crime(s) did they commit, and where did Jason's white supremacy enter into it? However, the split stage functions as more than a foreshadowing device promising a plot that connects these characters; their parallel positioning onstage also previews what the play will later illustrate—that they are intertwined by systems that disadvantage them both via similarly limited social and economic mobility, yet paradoxically function to divide them in the manner effected by the split stage, along the racial lines indicated visually by their physical difference and the animosity evident in Jason's tattoos.

Nottage's realism and Brechtian influences receive the majority of critical focus, but her focus on intersectionality via scrambling deserves greater scholarly attention. *Sweat* does not stand out as a primary example of scrambling-as-a-black-movement, but analyses of scrambling in the play benefit from Colbert's performance theory focus. As such, I will extend Colbert's theory beyond its original application to examine a key function of embodied movement in the play: Oscar's silent, industrious mobility. Once back in 2000, the play takes place in a bar managed by Stan, a white man injured long ago on the factory floor, and frequented by current employees of the factory, called Olstead's. Oscar, an American citizen of Columbian descent, works as Stan's bar-back. The bar is a warm and familiar place for its patrons. At this point, Chris and Jason's friendship is easy, as is that of their parents', Cynthia and Tracey—also employees on the floor of Olstead's. The four are all union members with consistent work, and so do not yet have concrete reasons to resent one another. However, within this intimate setting, Nottage establishes slow-burning racism that the audience expects will erupt. Even at this early point, Nottage introduces the specter of racism[21] through the character of Oscar, whose initial

[21] "Racism" is used here with intentional imprecision. As a person of Columbian descent, the character of Oscar may identify as Hispanic/Latinx while his race would depend largely on casting/identification. Neither the character

onstage appearances are notably ghost-like. He is most often seen, but not heard, and the stage directions state, "He goes about his business, rarely acknowledged by anyone except Stan" (16). The studied ignoring of Oscar by the bars' patrons, even early in the play, is notable for the audience because of Oscar's quiet but extensive industry. In both the Broadway and Kansas City Unicorn productions, Oscar was the only character who moved constantly and widely across the set. It may initially appear that this work merely functions as realism; after all, Oscar is at work and such work demands the wiping of tables and carrying of boxes, etc. However, in the context of a play, the constant silent movement gains further import, drawing audience eyes to Oscar as a symbolic representative of an underrepresented class of workers, while perversely—given his silent, ghost-like presence—inviting the audience to view him as a threat. Due to Nottage's mystery framing device and audiences' knowledge of prevailing antiimmigrant attitudes—which often function as anti-Hispanic attitudes—Nottage seeks to discomfit audiences with Oscar's presence and all that might arise from it. Given Nottage's broader effort in the work to make shared oppressions visible to groups otherwise encouraged to separate along lines of race/ethnicity, Oscar's movements might be viewed as a form of inverted black movement. The goal of black movements are, as Colbert states, to stage "embodied actions (a change in position, place, posture, or orientation) that draw from the imagination and the past to advance political projects" (*Black Movements* 5). In Colbert's hands, black movements are specifically and exclusively concerned with blackness; she emphasizes blackness as an identifier to be embraced and practiced, or in other words, chosen (*Black Movements* 14). My application of this movement to Oscar, then, is an intentional extension of her theory in response to the playwrights

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description nor the character himself clarifies, and bigotry does not usually stop to provide clear lines between these identities before maligning the person. The messy nature of discrimination in the United States on the basis of race/ethnicity then is easier captured through the blanket term of racism.

of my study; again, these playwrights have exhibited an interest in extending the African diaspora as an imitable framework for broader connections across shared oppressions. Oscar's inversion stands out as one of these.

The racism lurking behind Oscar's initial ghostliness is quickly given voice among the patrons. Oscar breaks his silence only when directly addressed, and these interactions are shown to be problematic from the beginning. In one early exchange, Tracey, a white woman, stereotypes Oscar: "You Puerto Ricans are burning shit down all over Reading" (21). Oscar responds only, "Well, I'm Columbian. And I don't know" (21). This venomless, almost polite correction reveals the quotidian nature of the stereotypes Oscar encounters and the care and personal control he must maintain to remain safe. Soon, Tracey's casual racism merges with her envy to begin marring her close friendship with Cynthia, a black woman. Both women attempt to secure a promotion—a management position that would remove them from the physically-taxing work on the floor. Cynthia gets the job. Oddly, when Tracey needs a confidant to share her anxieties about the plant and her envy, she chooses Oscar. She makes these confessions after Oscar reveals that the plant has been advertising openings—unbeknownst to the union—at the Centro Hispano. She tells him that he must be wrong, and then asserts that Cynthia's promotion stems from her race: "I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudice, but that's how things are going these days. I got eyes. They get tax breaks or something" (48). Throughout this conversation, Tracey demonstrates no awareness that she is sharing these offensive theories with a man who may not identify with her race, and further assumes that Oscar is an immigrant, and does not apologize when he tells her he was in fact born in the area. Instead, she justifies her superior sense of belonging by telling Oscar, "Well, my family's been here a long time. Since the twenties, okay?" (49). Through Tracey, Nottage makes an argument about the pervasiveness of a

perception of invasion among non-Hispanic white working-class communities that the hardships they encounter in the time of deindustrialization are due to their jobs being stolen—not eliminated or outsourced—an attitude that Tracey fails to see as misguided.[22] Her focus on "invasive" communities redirects her focus away from the business itself and their union-busting tactics. Like many factory workers confronting the realities of deindustrialization, Tracey's cry that "they" are taking "our" jobs remains blind to the fact that this is an impossibility. The employee can only take what the employer offers.

While Tracey and, later, her son Jason serve as representatives of white working-class anger and resentment, Nottage develops Oscar as the target of those emotions. When Tracey and the rest of Olstead's threaten strikes and later get locked out, Oscar crosses the picket line. Oscar feels no loyalty to the locked-out workers he sees in the bar. He tells Stan that his father's work as a janitor at the plant did not gain him any access to the union and the behavior of Stan's patrons has done little to endear them to him: "They brush by me without seeing me [. . .] If they don't see me, I don't need to see them" (92). Immediately, the tensions and anger Oscar's actions evoke are revealed; Tracey enters the bar and sees him and hurls insults. Only Stan's intervention prevents the altercation from becoming physical. The scene that follows marks the climax of the play; Jason and Chris attack Oscar, beating him badly, and when Stan attempts to intervene, he receives a blow to the head by a baseball bat, causing a major head wound that will

[22] Nottage runs a slight risk in her depiction of Tracey that some audience members may agree with Tracey's sentiments and miss the point of the exchange. The success of the scene partly depends on audience members' receptiveness to the message Nottage seeks to convey, but performance choices can help audiences along. In both productions I have seen, Tracey's defense of the superiority of her claim on Reading and the factory—"Well, my family's been here a long time. Since the twenties, okay?"—was played for laughs. Tracey clearly covers embarrassment at having assumed Oscar's foreignness with a defense that seems less sound to her when uttered aloud, and Oscar gives a look of incredulity with a hint of an eye roll that help bring the audience along with Nottage's intention. Such production choices are vital to the success of realism as a socially- and politically-relevant form of theater.

injure him for the rest of his life. This, we learn, is the cause of the prison sentences that have just ended as the play opens. In the acceleration of the scene toward this violence, the anger directed at Oscar quickly shifts from his behavior to his ethnicity. While he is initially a "scab," Jason escalates, calling him, "That fucking spic" (100). Tracey, Jason's mother, joins in with the stereotype, "So what he's got an apartment filled with seventeen relatives that gotta eat" (100). Tracey eggs on the ire, while Chris initially attempts to deescalate, but once Jason attacks, Chris's attempts at intervention only mean that Oscar's headbutt hits him, rather than Jason. At this, Chris's own anger takes over, leading him to join Jason in beating Oscar. As the scene plays out, the audience becomes aware that they are watching a lynching, one all the more upsetting given the fact that Chris is driven to participate. Nottage takes interest in exposing the intoxicating power of tribalism that would lead a black man in America to turn so violently against the new generation struggling for access to unions. Tracey, furthermore, who the stage directions specify is "watch[ing] the battle, her face contorted with rage," appears as the non-Hispanic white women bystanders in many famed photos of lynchings; her encouragement escalates the violence, driving her son to act on his racism and rage. Oscar's earlier silent movements across the stage, then, as a form of inverted black movements, expose the failure to form the cross-cultural shared recognitions of oppressions that Nottage's work demands. The inversion does not, as positive black movements do, radically imagine a reality in which these connections exist. Rather, it starkly reveals the void left by the inability to do so.

The course of the work, then, illustrates, in Nottage's words, the American working and middle classes' tendency to "cannibalize each other" through racial animosity. The play further exposes the psychic effects of capitalism that drive the traumatic monotony of casually racist and classist systems. In their article for HowlRound, "Black Women Have Theorized Everything,"

Sola Bamishigbin and Tia-Simone Gardner argue, "Nottage is careful to reflect a particular problem of laboring people. That is, she exposes the ways that white supremacy and capitalism seek to systematically drain the time, creativity, and energies of working people, keeping us so busy with the need to survive and stay sane that mass organizing feels impossible." This observation rings true, and many characters speak of or show through a scene's blocking the physical and mental exhaustion brought about by their labor. However, Nottage also seeks to reveal the ways in which the material realities of mass organizing have changed under NAFTA. That is to say, it is not merely exhaustion that inhibits the characters' motivation to resist, but rather government and corporate strategies that have all but destroyed union clout. She shows her characters to be formidably unionized, and initially the characters have faith that the union negotiations will produce favorable change. They remain prepared to strike and hold out for long periods. However, at the end of Act I, Chris and Jason rush to their workplace, telling Brucie, "Wilson says they moved three of the mills outta the factory over the long weekend" (62). What is most striking about this revelation is not the fact of it, which has been foreshadowed throughout the action. Rather, it is Nottage's decision to mire the audience in the same cycle of rumors and dismissals that marks the characters' environment; thus, when the outsourcing begins in full force, the fact that the characters and the audience have been kept completely in the dark as to management intentions allows the shock and betrayal to hit audiences and characters simultaneously. The employers never materialize, and Cynthia's liminal position as a new supervisor who still feels she belongs on the floor increasingly reveals itself to be a bargaining tactic by the higher ups; in her effort to preserve as many jobs as possible, Cynthia plays into the management's plan to gouge workers' benefits, reduce their pay by 60%, and extend shift hours (74-5). Fearing a full outsourcing, she urges her friends to take this deal; however, not only is the

deal untenable, but her newly attained outsider status earns her only distrust. Once the lockout takes place, Cynthia begins to suspect her own exploitation, telling Stan, "I wonder if they gave me this job on purpose. Pin a target on me so they can stay in their air-conditioned offices" (77). By presenting Cynthia as a pawn and a target—albeit one who quickly gets wise to her treatment—middle management and the union itself are shown to be ineffectual in a world of globalization.

Nottage seeks to historicize this new reality for her audience by placing the anti-Hispanic public attitude under NAFTA in line with the long history of black labor in the United States—a history she expectedly positions as African diasporic. Brucie, estranged husband of Cynthia, father of Chris, serves as the initial example of the disposable African-American worker. Nottage initially frames Brucie in a negative light because the audience is first introduced to him through Cynthia, who justifies her decision to kick him out by telling the bar of his drug addiction and related theft (17). However, Nottage quickly complicates this negative image. Brucie's union's failed negotiations with his textile mill leave him destitute, and his later recollections of the negotiation process reveal how impossible his situation was: "We offered to take a fifty-percent pay cut, they won't budge, they want us to give up our retirement" (35). Brucie, a black man, recalls the origin of the African diaspora through a simple equation: "Be a fucking slave. That's what they want" (35). Brucie's reference to the slave trade gains further depth when he discusses the growing tensions within the union, which suffers under the strain of increasingly unlikely negotiations with the mill. He tells Stan that, while in line at the union office, "this old white cat, whatever, gets in my face, talking about how we took his job [. . .] Like I'm fresh off the boat or some shit" (37). As this story continues, Nottage develops Brucie as a representative of black laborers across history in the United States. Brucie's father participated in the Great Migration,

leaving the "bale[s] of cotton" of sharecropping for the north and the promise of factory work. Later, Chris recalls Brucie standing up for a worker who lost a hand in the mill. Chris repeats Brucie's words: "We will not continue to bare our backs for them to strike us down" (88). In the Unicorn Theatre production, the actor playing Chris stood center stage for this recitation, the only figure standing in the bar; he drew himself up to his full height, visibly swelling with pride at the memory of Brucie in full power and command of his activism. Brucie's recalled rhetoric invites solidarity across difference, asking all union members to disparage in the highest degree the exploitation of their labor. At the same time, it echoes the long exclusion of black workers from worker protections from the time of slavery to early twentieth century rejections from unions. Long after this history, which seemingly closed with the once substantial victory of union inclusion, Brucie finds himself again discarded, foreshadowing both the similar fate of his family and the rancor Oscar will encounter. As he witnesses Chris recalling his former activism, he has just returned from a disappearance of several days, and his disheveled appearance leads the audience to understand he has been on a bender. He does not recognize Chris's quote, responding simply, "Did I say that?" (88). By the time the audience meets him, Brucie no longer maintains the hope he once had in collective action.

In revealing the material conditions of deindustrialization and the racism stoked to divide the populace, *Sweat* uses stage projections to make conspicuous the absence of the forces truly driving the action: the multinational company heads and trustees and Wall Street investment manipulators. These projections are vital because the characters rarely directly identify the forces behind the job loss and outsourcing. Stan, who functions as the voice of reason throughout the play, attempts to prevent Oscar's beating and redirect the patrons' anger toward the true cause of their misfortunes: "It ain't his fault. Talk to Olstead [the plant owner], his cronies. Fucking Wall

Street. Oscar ain't getting rich off your misery" (102). Nottage allows government and corporate interests and processes to operate outside the daily awareness of the majority of her characters—a sensible choice given that they are embroiled in their current fight and do not have the audience's benefit of hindsight. However, through the timely and often jarring projection of news clips during the performance, Nottage draws audience attention to the historical moment in which the play is set, ensuring that they see connections between news items from the 2000s and the events unfolding onstage. Perhaps the most powerful moment of juxtaposition follows the scene of Oscar's beating and Stan's injury. The stage blacks out as the two men's bodies lay on the stage lifeless; immediately, a news clip plays. The stage directions read, "President Bush prepares to present a very dire warning to the American people. He will suggest that unless Congress approves a $700,000,000,000 bailout for Wall Street [. . .] there will be ominous consequences for the entire U.S. economy and for millions of Americans" (106). In the Broadway production, the chosen clip was Bush's announcement itself. The clip seems designed to evoke anger and frustration as audience members understand these corporations and their heads will, by and large, suffer no criminal charges or substantial harm to their business; by contrast the citizens most affected by predatory lending and irresponsible trading, investing, and outsourcing are symbolized onstage with the prostrate bodies of Oscar and Stan. These juxtapositions are, as noted earlier by Mohler, Brechtian in nature, functioning to "disrupt[] the emotional power of the realistic aspects of Nottage's storytelling and contextualize[] them within their specific sociopolitical moments" (80). These moments also draw on tools of agit-prop, especially given the explicitly political nature of these abrupt interruptions. While Nottage draws on both epic and agit-prop theatre trends that emerged in the 1920s, I argue we should recognize the way these techniques function as transnational feminist scrambling, given her usage and

broader message of connections. What makes this scrambling effective is not merely that it disrupts or pulls audiences momentarily out of the realism of the play as a whole, but that, in so doing, the content being scrambled makes visible the otherwise obscured through-lines of cause and effect; the moment guides the audience to understand that the staged events should not be written off purely as the poor decisions of discrete individuals, but even more vitally must be recognized as effects of untenable conditions created through the events referenced in the news clips. Nottage seems to argue that, yes, Chris and Jason are responsible—but not solely responsible.

In addition to this Brechtian variant of scrambling, Nottage also shapes the play via her mystery frame (i.e., what did these characters do to get prison sentences?). This frame allows Nottage to make a further argument about the effects of globalization in the United States: a strategy of government and corporate forces in order to quell the unrest and resistance among the discarded workforce is to grow the felon class. This focus on the felon class runs throughout both works of this chapter. Hall explores the ways in which militarization of the police force and job droughts force working class citizens—particularly citizens of color—into the drug trade to make a living, and then penalize the participants in that industry with disproportionate fervor. Nottage, by contrast, introduces the problem of mass incarceration more symbolically. The audience does witness Jason and Chris committing a crime—a brutal beating of Oscar in which Stan becomes collateral damage. Their prison sentences are not unjustly targeting them, unlike the unnecessary funding and rhetoric surrounding the War on Drugs that has led to mass incarceration for low-level drug offenses. Nonetheless, in exposing the "cannibalization" of minority lives, which is of peak interest to her, Nottage also reveals the ways in which government and industry work together to suppress unrest among the most exploited class. Chris, who had ambitions for college

if he could save up enough money to go, now finds himself mired in the second-class citizenry of the felon class; he tells his parole officer, "I keep hitting up against that box. That damn question's a barbed-wire fence" (10). He refers to the box on the vast majority of applications that asks applicants to disclose felon status. Chris, a black man, now finds himself a part of the largest recognizable class against which discrimination remains perfectly legal—what Michelle Alexander terms the new Jim Crow. By contrast, in the opening scene, Jason has already secured a job "making pretzels," low-paying though it doubtless is (6). Removed of employment prospects and broad-spectrum credibility, Chris and those like him have little hope of organizing against the forces that drove him to this "cannibalization"—indeed, for many members of the felon class, even political opposition through the vote is denied.

Conclusion

At its heart, *Sweat*'s exposure of globalization, capitalism, and these forces' investment in mass incarceration functions almost as a Greek tragedy with docudrama elements; Jason and Chris share a fatal flaw of being unable to recognize the larger forces at work, leading to their downfall as they attack the wrong symbol of their misfortune. However, Nottage offers a tentative redemption. The play ends just as Jason and Oscar return to the bar; they are seeking the words to apologize to Oscar, but as the stage goes dark, they have not yet found them. Nottage calls their reunion a "fractured togetherness" (112). The ending does not offer resolution, and the news that the plant has fully closed looms over the action. Nonetheless, Nottage refuses to write an utterly bleak ending. When Stan reenters, his traumatic brain injury severely inhibits his speech and movement. Oscar has found his place in the service economy and now manages the bar; he keeps Stan on the payroll, although it is clear Stan is not able to contribute a great deal of labor. Jason tells Oscar, "It's nice that you take care of him" (112).

Oscar's reply, the final line of the play, runs, "That's how it oughta be" (112). This conclusion, not precisely a call to action, but more a lament, demonstrates Oscar's own growing awareness of the powers of collective action in community creation. Although his action is individual, his final words offer the hope of a community that takes care of its members, and it is doubtless the lesson Nottage hopes to impress on her audiences. The staged action does not, then, as Colbert's black movements would have it, radically imagine an alternative present in which this community activism already thrives. However, through scrambling and what I have termed its inverted black movements, *Sweat* offers both a vision of what community activism is not, and what it could be.

Through transnational feminist scrambling and black movements—and their connection to African diasporic performance traditions—both Hall and Nottage establish visibility across difference in keeping with transnational feminist theories of Davis, Mohanty, Alexander, and more. While Hall demonstrates the interplay between militarization and mass incarceration, Nottage focuses on globalization and late capitalism, connecting these forces to an investment in racism and mass incarceration. Issues like the War on Drugs, disposable soldiers, union dissolution, and the growing felon class remain in the United States' imagination largely national issues, but these works reveal them to be imbricated in the larger system of the nation's neoimperial project. The playwrights accomplish this aim both via the worlds they create with their historical/theoretical scrambling, and through embodied movements onstage, which I have argued should be considered forms of Colbert's black movements. This union of scrambling as historical theory and as a form of Colbert's performance analysis enriches each, growing the critical vocabulary necessary to fully understand the promise of the works of my study. As a whole, this chapter extends and more fully represents the transnational feminist scrambling

exhibited by the playwrights of my study, demonstrating that these theories' concerns are not limited to gender and sexuality because such exclusionary boxes fail to recognize the intersectionality of oppressions. In so doing, these works further challenge and expand the current reductive understanding of African diasporic performance advanced by Paul Carter Harrison. While Harrison's formulation rejects realism and works about black folks that are not African diasporic in form, my focus on scrambling and black movements rightfully position these plays as politically- and socially-relevant forms of theater. By expanding Harrison's term to include these works, the important intersectional theorizing imagined and enacted in Hall's and Nottage's plays gains full purchase; they evoke the existing community of the African diaspora through their forms of black movements and the characters' connections, and thus the playwrights present a web of affiliation from which new forms of community and shared recognition can spring.

Coda:

What is the Future Real Conditional of African Diasporic Performance?

The playwrights of this study are united by their works' potential for forward-thinking activism. Whether or not they specifically position their work as transnational feminist activism, they have each shown that the stage is a space well-suited to this effort. This study explores new terrain through the fusion of interdisciplinary methodologies which, when combined, reveal the ways in which African diasporic aesthetics and points of connection unite these playwrights. The webs of affiliation they most often depict in the works of this study are African diasporic in nature, and for this reason, I have argued that their work should become the basis for a scholarly expansion and broader application of a term originally coined by scholar/artist Paul Carter Harrison: African diasporic performance. Harrison's limited definition does imply an activist element in his assertion that practitioners should center blackness and produce work in black-owned and -operated theatres. In practice, the artists of this study embrace antiracist activism in their use of African diasporic performance and networks, but they also expand the application of diaspora to intersectional concerns of gender, sexuality, and more, in keeping with transnational feminisms. I have thus argued that any definition of African diasporic performance that does not include these intersections will fail to capture these artists' contributions. In my view, African diasporic performance is a transnational, intersectional feminist form of theatre. These chapters reveal that African diasporic performance can thrive in realism, despite the ongoing tendency to reject wholesale the potential of realism as a form of theatre suited to activism. Whether realist in nature or not, these works have the capacity to shift audience perception through their imagined futures or alternate histories.

As I consider new directions for this expanded definition of African diasporic performance, I am persuaded that the way forward must engage deeply with these artists' commitment to futurity. When feminist and African diaspora studies scholar Tina Campt published her 2015 book, *Listening to Images*, she centered it on a call that reverberates in the wake of this study:

> The grammar of black feminist futurity that I propose here is a grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future. It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have* **had to** *happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must. (17, emphasis original)

Campt's tense of possibility calls for a broader form of black feminist activism that perfectly aligns with the work being done in African diasporic performance—especially as it intersects with Colbert's black movements. Colbert asserts that black movements "reshape temporalities in order to reorganize the social and cultural fields that facilitate the social and physical deaths of black people" (*African American* 265). This capacity for radical imagination—a force to transform histories, the present, and the future—are vital parts of African diasporic performance. This study has demonstrated how these artists enact black feminist futurity within the worlds they create and offer onstage. As a coda, then, I now want to gesture toward the necessary next steps and natural connections to the arguments I have outlined. Two central questions emerge in order to point toward what will have had to happen for this theatrical form and its political aims to thrive. First, what scholarly conversations offer the best opportunity to broaden the impact of

African diasporic performance? Second, what are the necessary personal and institutional commitments that need to be formed to allow African diasporic plays to fulfill their transnational feminist goals?

A powerful emerging cultural and scholarly discourse of black feminist futurity is Afrofuturism. Once applied primarily to black speculative fiction primarily produced within the United States, Afrofuturism has now become a multidisciplinary, multi-genre field of study for works across the African diaspora. The radical optimism at the center of transnational feminisms and the promise of imagined futures that are separate from black suffering (central to Colbert's black movements) both speak to the potential of African diasporic performance to expand and further align itself with Afrofuturist studies. While this study does not cover those grounds, Afrofuturism is fast becoming a theoretical grounding with far greater application than strict genre studies centered on sci-fi, fantasy, and attendant technologies. With its focus on futurity and interest in depicting black thriving, rather that reiterating black lives only in relation to slavery and contemporary white supremacy, such a theoretical and topical focus aligns nicely with the aims of much of this contemporary work. The increasing breadth and potentiality of Afrofuturism is aptly captured in Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones's introduction to *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, wherein they explain the title concept: "the twenty-first century contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism [are] emerging in the areas of metaphysics, speculative philosophy, religion, visual studies, performance, art, and philosophy of science or technology [. . . Afrofuturism 2.0] has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural 'Pan-African' movement" (x). In continuing efforts to periodize and recognize the unique contributions of this new wave of twenty-first century playwrights of my study, an Afrofuturist frame may grow to suit these playwrights alongside African diasporic performance.

What is more, the popularity of Afrofuturism as a cultural institution via Comic-Con and broader cultural conversations may—if prominently connected to theatrical performance and innovation—do work to invigorate and shift the typical demographics of theatre audiences.

Another necessary direction for future study will be to apply these new parameters for African diasporic performance to black playwrights' work being written and performed in African diasporic sites outside the United States. Although beyond of the scope of this study, this broader comparative study will prove vital; it will allow for more definitive conclusions about the applicability of African diasporic performance as a mode of transnational feminist activism. It will answer the question of whether this aspirational global network of playwrights does indeed present sufficient affinity through their work to truly make visible to one another diverse groups that might work together to address the dangers of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. Additionally, examining African diasporic playwrights within the Americas will positively impact the broader field of American studies. Popular imagination within the United States continues to equate America with the United States, failing to recognize the presence—let alone the impact—of other American nations. While American studies—both within literary studies and within the humanities as a whole—have long rejected this myopia, the phrase "American theatre" continues to align with publications featuring work written and produced within the United States. A search of recent books with "American theatre" in the title on the University of Kansas library catalog produces almost entirely studies centered on work written and produced in the United States. By expanding the interrogation of African diasporic performance to the Americas more broadly, scholars can continue the work to shake loose the tendency to ignore theatre of other American nations when defining American theatre. Even from the United States-based playwrights of this study, gestures toward a more complete

understanding of the Americas are present. McCraney's love of the Gulf of Mexico as a symbol of intersections is clear in his discussions around the triptych: "The two portions of the earth meet in the Gulf of Mexico, and that gulf is a rich and fecund place. It's got old nasty stories about conquistadors and pirates, and French and Spanish and African blood mixed there to make this incredible hodgepodge" (qtd. in Brodersen 8). McCraney's embrace of symbolism finds complement in Nottage's and Gurira and Salter's focus on materiality in tracing the flows of capital between the United States and Mexico. Examining work written and performed in other American countries will continue to broaden our understanding of the implications of our interconnectedness and the impact of African diasporic performance.

Finally, African diasporic performance cannot fulfill its transnational feminist goals without substantial shifts in access and ownership in theatrical production here in the United States. This study would not be complete without one last recognition of the effects of American neoliberal capitalism. These chapters have focused on the ways these playwrights' work exposes the effects of globalization and capitalism to their audiences. They have not focused on the financial realities of producing theatre in the United States. Such a study will be necessary in the future to gauge the full story behind the reasons scholarship has seen such slow growth in the recognition of new black playwrights' work being produced in the United States. Indeed, many works of my study have come to my notice because I have been able to see them produced, and that is the case because several of them have appeared on Broadway or in predominantly white-run regional theatres. In August Wilson's famous speech at the 1996 Theatre Communications' Group conference, he shared an oft-quoted observation: "Black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital [. . .] it just isn't funded" ("Ground on Which"). Twenty-three years on, *American Theatre* published their March 2019 issue on "The State of Black Theatre." Kelundra

Smith's "Black Stage Report" within that issue does not indicate positive growth: "White theatres capitalizing on the potency of Black (and brown, Asian, Indigenous, et al.) stories is the elephant in the room of American theatre. These major theatres get the funding to pay Black playwrights more to produce plays so they can prove to funders that they are investing in diversity. It's a dysfunctional cycle that reflects the pervasiveness of white supremacy" (21). This practice creates a bottleneck, limiting black voices within these commercial spaces while simultaneously interrupting revenue that might have kept another theatre afloat. As this study demonstrates, important work grounded in activism can still exist even within the extensive limitations of a system that consistently fails to grapple with its racism and capitalism. Nonetheless, United States theatre audiences and scholars must reflect on how valuing and funding more black-owned and produced theatre will advance the goals of transnational feminist activism and African diasporic theatre. Certainly, this is one change that will have had to happen to produce the reality that transnational feminism dares to imagine.

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